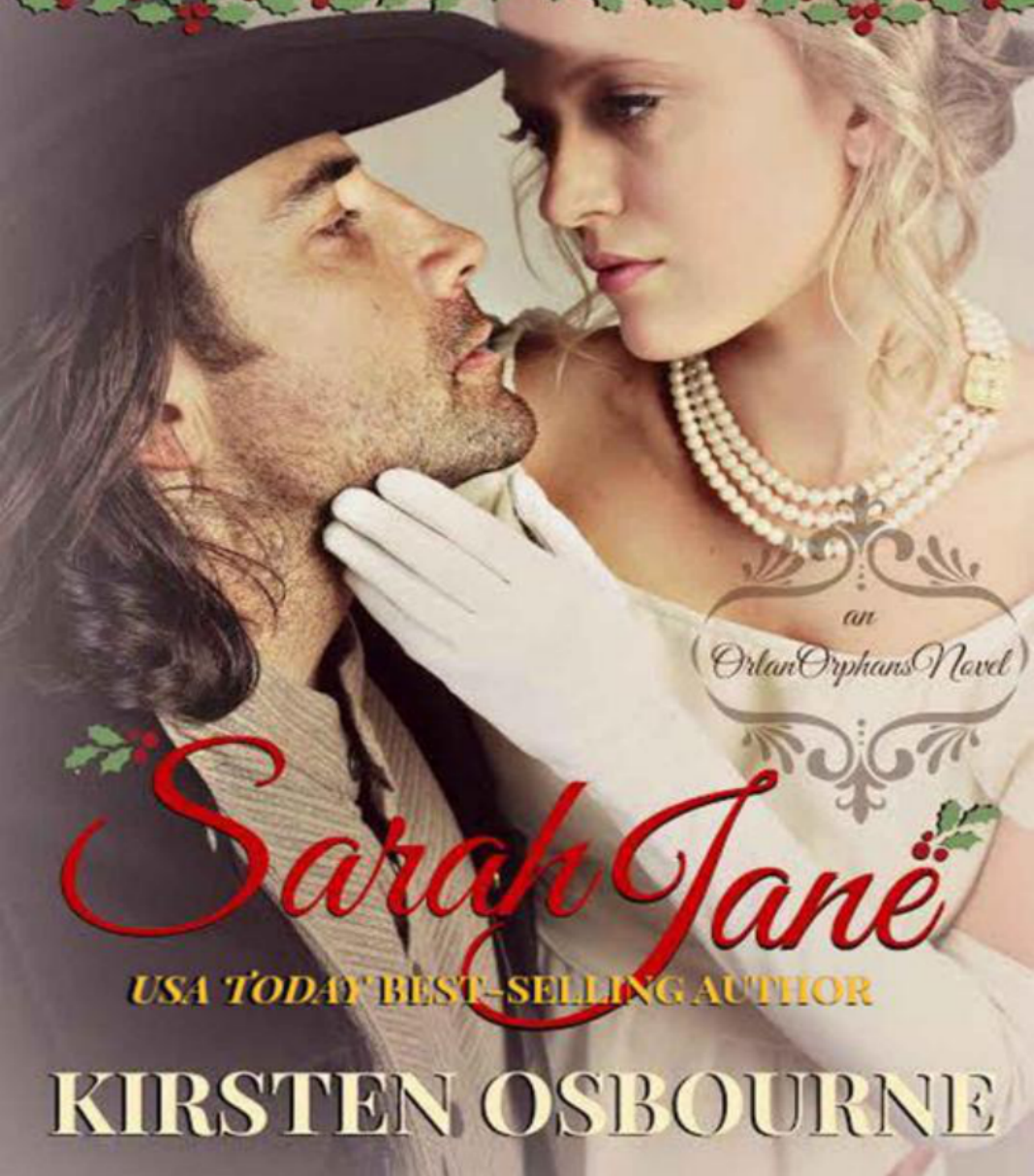


Countdown to Christmas



*an
Orlan Orphans Novel*

Sarah Jane

USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

KIRSTEN OSBOURNE

Sarah Jane
Countdown to Christmas

by Kirsten Osbourne
Trifecta Books

Book design and layout copyright © 2015 by Trifecta Books
Cover design copyright © 2015 by Jenni James

This is a work of fiction, and the views expressed herein are the sole responsibility of the author. Likewise, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are represented fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, or actual events or locales, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means whatsoever without written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Copyright© 2015 by Kirsten Osbourne



Table of Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Epilogue
Author Bio

Chapter One

Sarah Jane Jefferson sat in church, listening to the new preacher with half an ear. Usually she was more attentive during Sunday services, but she had to find someone to play Santa Claus for the orphanage, and she was running out of ideas. No one wanted to don the suit and padding required to play the part. She really couldn't blame them, because she wouldn't want to do it either, but she still needed someone.

Her eyes landed on the new preacher yet again. He was so young and handsome. She'd heard some of her "sisters" talking about him, but she wouldn't lower herself to fawn over the new preacher in the small town of Nowhere, Texas. No, he was there as God's representative, and there was no way she'd stoop so low. Now, asking him to play Santa Claus? That she could do!

He'd only been in town for a month or so, and already all the young ladies in the congregation were flummoxed. She couldn't deny the man was handsome. Well, sort of. He needed a haircut badly. He certainly didn't look like a preacher to her—more like a cowboy. Why, there was even a cowboy hat on a chair near him. She knew he'd plop it back on his head as soon as he was out of church. Now, what kind of preacher wore a cowboy hat?

Sarah Jane had been an orphan for as long as she could remember, but there was a short time, when she was nine and ten, when she'd lived with a preacher and his wife, and it was the happiest time she could remember. Ever since then, she'd made it her goal in life to do everything she could to be a good Christian, hoping that someday, they'd be proud of her.

They'd only been able to keep her for two years, and she'd cried wretchedly when they'd taken her back to the orphanage with all the other children. She'd been sure they'd come back for her, but five years later, she and all the other girls in the orphanage in Orlan, New York, had been ejected from their home.

Sarah Jane had to admit that her circumstances in Nowhere, Texas, were much better than they'd been back in New York, because she and all of her friends had been adopted by an eccentric old couple who loved them dearly.

She fidgeted a bit in her seat, and Edna Petunia, her new "mother," pulled a peppermint stick from her cleavage and offered it to her. "No, thank you," Sarah Jane whispered. "I don't think we should eat candy in church."

Edna Petunia shrugged her shoulders and popped the peppermint stick into her own mouth. "A little bubbly sweat never hurt anyone,"

she whispered to Sarah Jane.

Sarah Jane closed her eyes. She didn't think the word "bubby" was appropriate for church either, but Edna Petunia had never worried about what was appropriate for anything. She just didn't seem to care.

Sarah Jane's eyes went back to the new preacher, Pastor Micah Barton. He was a man of God, dedicating his life to serving Him. Surely he'd be willing to dress up as Santa for a bunch of orphans. If he wouldn't, who would?

When the sermon was over, Sarah Jane waited until most people had finished shaking the pastor's hand before she took her turn. "I have a question to ask you, Pastor Barton."

Micah Barton looked at the pretty girl standing before him. She looked like she was fresh from the schoolroom. He'd rarely seen her smile, though, and that worried him. He knew she was one of the orphans who lived with the Sanders, but wasn't certain which one, other than she was the one he wanted to get to know better. There was something about her eyes that mesmerized him. "What can I help you with, Miss Sanders?"

Sarah Jane bristled at the sound of her adoptive parents' last name. She'd been given permission to keep the name she'd been born with. "It's Miss Jefferson," she corrected. "Sarah Jane Jefferson."

"Oh, pardon me. Miss Jefferson. How may I help you?" Micah wanted to laugh at the girl. She seemed so proper to him, as if she thought she was above everyone else. She'd learn as she got older not to judge everyone by her own narrow view of Christianity.

"I volunteer at the orphanage," she told him. It had been established shortly after she and her sisters came to town. "We're organizing a Christmas party for the orphans, but we've been unable to find someone who is willing to play the part of Santa Claus."

"And you think I'd make a good Santa Claus?" He stared at her in open disbelief. "Becoming a pastor must have changed my appearance more than I realized!"

Sarah Jane shook her head. "I'm not saying you look old, because of course you don't. The young ladies my age wouldn't be acting crazed trying to get your attention if you did. No, I just need someone, and I hope you have it in your heart to do this for the orphans."

If she'd phrased it any other way, it would have been easy to say no. "I suppose I can. Do you have the suit? When is the party?"

"Saturday night. We have gifts for each child that are all wrapped and ready to be given to them. All you have to do is pull them out and read the names on the tag. Then each child will sit on your lap and tell you what they want, and you give them the gift."

"What if I don't give them what they want?" He had a mental image of one of the children crying hysterically because he gave them

a pair of socks when they wanted a toy train. He didn't want to be responsible for that!

"The gifts the children get at this party will simply be special toys they've asked for. Nothing else. They'll get clothing and boring gifts at the orphanage on Christmas morning."

Micah nodded. "Yes, I'll do it. Where can I pick up the suit?"

"Come to the orphanage tomorrow morning. I have it in a box, and I'll give it to you while the children are at school. I don't want them to have any idea it's you. Most of them are still young enough to believe there's a Santa."

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying you don't believe, Miss Jefferson?"

Sarah Jane scoffed. "I've known better for many years, Pastor Barton. Some of us learn the truth at a very young age." She looked out the door to where Edna Petunia was making odd hand motions at her. "Whatever are you doing, Edna Petunia?"

Micah turned to look at the older woman who quickly hid her hands behind her back as if she were innocent. "I was trying to get you to ask the pastor for Sunday dinner!"

Sarah Jane looked at the pastor, wondering vaguely if Edna Petunia had him in mind for one of the girls to marry. She hoped not. "Would you like to come to Sunday dinner with my... family?" She hesitated to use the word, because her household was like no other.

He had not been looking forward to another Sunday meal alone. He was surprised how much he missed the camaraderie of the seminary in Dallas. "I'd like that a lot."

She smiled sweetly, wanting to grit her teeth. She had no desire to see him with her sisters. She had too much respect for any man of God to want that. "Do you know how to get out to the house, or do you need directions?"

"Sarah Jane, stop being so uptight and just offer to ride with him. There's no sin in being in a buggy with a man if you can be seen the whole time." Edna Petunia shook her head.

Sarah Jane blushed. "I guess I can ride with you. If you don't mind, that is."

"Not at all." Micah looked around the church and saw that everyone else had left while he talked to her. "My buggy is at the house. Can you wait a minute while I hitch up the horses?"

Sarah Jane turned pleading eyes on Edna Petunia. No matter what the older woman said, Sarah Jane knew it wasn't a good idea to be alone in the company of an attractive member of the opposite sex. She *wouldn't* be alone with him. "Do you want to wait for us, Edna Petunia? Or do you want to leave one of the younger girls to ride with us?"

"Well, I really don't really see that you're in any danger from the pastor, but why don't you take Theresa with you? She'll keep you company." Edna Petunia didn't wait for an argument, which she certainly would have gotten.

Theresa was there a moment later. "Oh, I'm so excited that I get to ride with you, Pastor Barton. I really like going on rides with the older girls, but they always choose Katie because she's so quiet and meek, and that's just not who I am." She linked her arm through Sarah Jane's, tugging her along after the pastor, who was walking briskly toward the stable that was next to the parsonage. "Thanks for asking for me, Sarah Jane. I didn't even know you liked me. Sometimes you're hard to read, you know."

As they walked, Theresa chattered on and on about a new book she had read and enjoyed, and all about school. She was a very bright girl, but she *never* quit talking! It made Sarah Jane want to snatch her bald-headed at times.

They stood and talked quietly while the pastor hitched up his buggy. Well, Theresa talked while Sarah Jane listened. As usual.

When the buggy was ready, Pastor Barton handed first Sarah Jane and then Theresa up and made certain the lap robe was tucked around their legs. "Are you warm enough?"

Sarah Jane laughed softly. "Texas winters are very mild compared to the winters we saw in New York State. We're fine."

Theresa nodded. "Of course, some hot chocolate wouldn't be amiss, but we'll be fine."

"How long have you lived in Texas?" Micah asked.

Sarah Jane waited a moment for Theresa to respond, but when she didn't, she answered. "Three years. Our orphanage was purchased by a church whose leadership committee didn't think boys and girls should live together under one roof, so we were sent here to Texas. Do you know Tino and Cassie Hayes?"

Micah nodded after a moment. "I think so. They have two small children?" He pictured a couple in their late thirties, hoping it was them.

"Yes, that's the Hayes. Mrs. Hayes was the matron of our orphanage, and she traveled here with us. Mr. Hayes drove us down here in a bus."

"A bus? Really? That's a long drive!"

"It was. We camped on the side of the road every night. It was long and difficult. When we arrived, there was no house waiting for us like we'd been promised. That's why Edna Petunia and Cletus took us in, even though they were newlyweds." Sarah Jane didn't add that Edna had always wanted a houseful of bastard children because she hated that word. She knew Edna Petunia said it with love, but others

didn't.

"Those two were newlyweds three years ago? Really?" The elderly couple seemed as though they'd been married for many years to Micah. Why, she was constantly calling her husband an old coot, which Micah had rarely seen even in couples who had been married for fifty years, let alone three.

Sarah Jane nodded. "They're an odd couple, I'll admit. They are very loving and generous, though, so I can't complain." Well, she could, and often did in her prayers, but deep down, she knew they loved her more than anyone else ever had—except maybe Cassie Hayes.

"They seem to care for all of you."

"They do. They make it very clear." Sarah Jane sighed. "They treat us like we're special to them, and that's all that really matters. You don't get much of that in an orphanage." She pointed ahead. "You need to turn there, off to the right."

He turned where she indicated, looking at her out of the corner of his eye. She was a pretty little thing, but so serious. He wondered if she ever laughed or showed any kind of emotion. She'd seemed very intense when she'd asked him to play Santa Claus, but he'd watched her adopted sisters, and they all seemed to laugh and joke with ease.

"How many of you were adopted by the Sanders?" he asked.

"Fifteen total. There are still thirteen of us at home. The two oldest have married and moved out. Opal and Ruby."

"Were they related? Someone obviously liked gemstone names."

"Yes, they're twins, but not identical."

"So there are thirteen young women living together in one house?" He couldn't imagine a house big enough for that many girls. He was the lone boy in a family of seven children. Sometimes he was shocked his sisters had never killed one another.

Sarah Jane nodded. "It's just as loud as you're imagining. Some of the girls are . . . chatty." If Theresa hadn't been there, she'd have mentioned her frustration with one girl in particular who just couldn't seem to stop talking, but she didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"I'm sure it's a loud place to live." He shook his head. "I have six sisters, and they never shut up."

"Do you like quiet?" From what she'd seen, she was usually the odd one, preferring to be alone in the quiet rather than surrounded by sound. She'd been thrilled when the twins had married, and she'd gotten her own room. It was so much easier for her without the constant chatter.

He shrugged. "Most of the time. I've had very little of it, though. I went straight from a houseful of sisters to the dormitory at the seminary. I was given this assignment right after I graduated in

August."

"Have you been here that long?" she asked in surprise. It seemed like it had only been a couple of weeks.

"I went home for a month first. To visit with my family. I've been here since the beginning of October."

"So two months."

He nodded. "I'm doing my best to get to know everyone, but it's hard. Nowhere's a small town, but people come to church from all over the area."

"Do you do home visits?" She remembered when she'd lived with Pastor Brown and his wife. They'd gone to the home of a different parishioner every Sunday evening.

"I'm trying to give everyone time to invite me rather than just showing up at their homes, but so far, I've only been invited by a few families. After the first of the year, I'm going to start inviting myself." He leaned toward Sarah Jane and whispered, "I'm sick of my own cooking."

Sarah Jane looked at him for a moment, trying to determine if he was serious. Finally, she forced a laugh, deciding he must be joking. "They didn't teach you to cook at seminary?"

"Not one of the classes I was blessed to take." He shrugged. "I get by, but I sure do miss my mother's cooking. She was a true genius in the kitchen."

"You need to stop by anytime you're hungry. I enjoy cooking, and Edna Petunia and I always make enough to feed an army." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Sarah Jane regretted them. Would he think she was like all the other young ladies in the congregation, just wanting to show off her cooking skills for the new pastor? She hoped not. With her upbringing, she simply believed in having a generous spirit, especially toward those called to the ministry.

He nodded with a smile, liking the idea of dropping in on occasion. "I'd be very happy to do that."

She directed him to a large white house located about fifteen minutes out of town. He looked at it with surprise, not having expected something quite so nice or so big.

He got down and helped both girls to the ground. Theresa ran into the house, and he fell into step beside Sarah Jane. "How much time do you spend at the orphanage?"

"I go there every day except Sunday, but sometimes I go on Sunday as well. I know what it's like to live in an orphanage, and I want every child there to realize that God loves them."

"Your orphanage must have been very devout," he said, following her into the house.

She shrugged. "Not particularly, but I lived with a minister and

his wife for two years during my childhood. They taught me well."

Edna Petunia popped her head out of the kitchen. "Sarah Jane, throw on an apron and help me. None of the other girls can make a gravy half as good as yours."

Sarah Jane blushed as she hurried into the kitchen to obey. She knew Edna Petunia's words were because Pastor Barton was there. No other reason. They were true, but she didn't need to be told that. She knew she was the best cook in the house, except for maybe Edna Petunia, but she was at least as good as the older woman.

Micah stepped into the kitchen behind her. "Is there something I can help with, Mrs. Sanders?"

Edna shooed him out of the kitchen with her hand. "Have one of the girls take you to see the old coot. I think he's sitting in the formal parlor with his feet up. It's what he does."

Theresa was standing watching them. "I'll take you, Pastor."

He followed her through the house, and she chattered on about how nice it was to have someone other than all of the girls there for a meal. "Cletus, Edna Petunia says you need to entertain the pastor for a while."

Cletus glanced up from the book he was reading, and Micah looked at the title with astonishment. "*Modern Law in Texas?* Are you studying to be a lawyer, Mr. Sanders?"

Cletus shrugged. "I was a banker and studying to be a lawyer before the War of Northern Aggression, and I'm fascinated by it. I just have a bit more studying to do before I have a law degree. I might do it."

Micah was surprised. The man had to be in his sixties. "Would you practice law?" He didn't wait to be asked to sit, but instead sat across from Cletus on the other sofa.

"I'd probably run for judge. I spent a lot of years not caring about anyone or anything around me. Edna Petunia changed all that, though."

"How?" Micah was fascinated by the relationship between the older couple.

Cletus set his book on the table beside the sofa. "My parents died during the war while I was off fighting for states' rights. I came home to nothing. I still owned this house, sure, but I had no desire to be here because it brought up lots of memories and made me sad. So I lived as a hermit in a tent in the woods."

"You could have lived here, and you lived in the woods instead?"

"There's no point in having great wealth if you have no one to spend it on."

Micah blinked a few times. The words made sense to him, but he'd rarely heard anyone speak them. "That's true, sir."

"When Edna Petunia came to town, I fell in love the moment I saw her." Cletus's eyes got a faraway look. "With peppermint sticks in her cleavage and a flask of cough tonic in the pocket of her apron. Dr. Iris would constantly shake her head at her, and not let her take her flask to church, but I saw in her a kindred soul, one I knew I needed to spend the rest of my life with."

"And she didn't want to live with you in a tent?"

Cletus laughed. "No, she didn't. She made me promise to build her a house, said she'd be content with a small cabin in the woods."

Micah grinned. "You didn't tell her about this place?"

"Heck no! I wanted her to marry me because she loved me, not because I could offer her riches. Since she wouldn't let me . . ." Cletus trailed off, blushing a little. "Well, since she wouldn't show me her love before marriage, I waited to show her this place until after we'd said 'I do.'"

"I imagine she was surprised."

"Surprised? The woman was shocked as spit! I think it's the only time I've ever surprised her—well, except when I walked into the church for our wedding with my hair cut and my whiskers shaved. My beard was halfway down my chest when we met." Cletus chuckled. "It's surprising she agreed, but she loved me too. God blessed me with a beautiful, kindhearted woman, and now I feel like I need to give back to the community. Yes, I'm going to finish my schooling and run for judge. I've seen a lot in my seventy-odd years of life, and it's time for me to do what's right."

Micah nodded, smiling. "It's amazing what the love of a good woman will do for a man."

Cletus let out a shout of laughter. "Who told you Edna Petunia's a good woman? Why, she's a handful, but she's my handful. I think I'm going to keep her."

"I don't think you have a choice at this point, Mr. Sanders. She seems like the type to wallop you with a frying pan if you try to put her out."

"You do know my Edna Petunia. She's trying to teach all those girls to be just like her too, but some of them just don't have it in them. Why, a couple of the girls are downright meek and soft-spoken, much to Edna Petunia's annoyance."

"Why would that bother her?"

"Oh, she thinks girls should have a 'backbone,' and be able to stand up for themselves. I've tried to teach all the girls to shoot and be strong, but a couple of them just won't do it."

"Like Sarah Jane?" Micah asked, curious about the young lady.

Cletus nodded. "I tried to get that girl to learn to shoot a pistol. She's such a pretty little thing, I wanted her to be able to protect

herself from unscrupulous men. She wouldn't have anything to do with it. Was acting like it would bite her if she even touched it. That girl is a pacifist if I've ever seen one."

Micah nodded. "I'm not surprised. She seems very . . . soft to me."

Cletus raised an eyebrow. "You better not be speaking from experience. No one touches my girls unless they're married to them. Especially Sarah Jane. She's got a special place in my heart."

"I promise, I've only shaken her hand. I've never touched her in any other way." Micah was shocked the man's mind had gone there.

"Glad to hear it. I wouldn't want to have to shoot you."

Micah blinked a couple of times, wondering if the man was threatening him or not. "I'm a man of the cloth."

"I know that. You still don't get to touch my girls. You're a man. And she's a beautiful young woman. I'll do anything I can to protect her." Cletus leaned back on the sofa and studied the younger man. "How well do you know my Sarah Jane, anyway?"

Micah felt as if he were being dissected by the other man's eyes. "Not well at all. She asked me today if I would play the part of Santa Claus for the Christmas party at the orphanage. That's all."

"You said yes?"

"I did." Micah didn't really want to do it, but he had agreed, and he did want the orphans to have a good Christmas.

"Well, hallelujah. I didn't want to get roped into that one!"

"It's a worthy cause," Micah protested.

"Oh, sure it is. I just don't want to have to dress up in that suit. Edna Petunia would find a way to get a photographer out here and hang the resulting photograph above the mantel where she could look at it and chuckle every day for the rest of our lives."

"She wouldn't really, would she?"

"Oh, yes, she would. The woman has a mean streak a mile wide," Cletus told him with obvious pride.

"And that pleases you?" Micah asked with surprise.

"If it didn't, I wouldn't have married her, now, would I?"

Chapter Two

Theresa saved Micah from responding by stepping into the room. "Lunch is ready."

Micah jumped to his feet, thrilled not have to finish the conversation he was having with Mr. Sanders. "It smells delicious."

"Oh, it will be," Theresa said. "Between Sarah Jane and Edna Petunia, the meals around here are always delicious. I'm surprised any of us can fit into our dresses!" She hurried out of the room, and Micah followed her, hoping she was leading the way to the dining room.

They reached a room with a huge, long table where the entire family was sitting, waiting. The seat beside Sarah Jane had been left empty, so he sat down, pleased to be beside her. She seemed like a little piece of calm in the room that was full of chaos.

"Pastor Barton, would you mind saying the prayer for us, please?" Edna Petunia asked.

Everyone around the table reached out and took the hands of the two on either side of them, and he felt Sarah Jane's hand slip into his. He squeezed it tightly, suddenly thinking of her in ways he shouldn't think of one so young. She was over eighteen, wasn't she?

"Heavenly Father, thank You for this food You've provided, and for the opportunity to fellowship with one another. Thank You for giving me the chance to get to know this . . . interesting family. I pray this in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen."

Sarah Jane bit her lip to stifle the giggle that threatened to erupt when he called the family interesting. She sobered her face before everyone raised their heads. She had learned before she'd ever gone to the orphanage that people didn't like loud females, and she knew that laughing wasn't something she should do in public. And with a family as large as hers, her whole life was public.

Micah looked over at Sarah Jane, noting the laughter in her eyes and wondering what had caused it. Her face was as serious as ever, though. Why didn't she smile when she found something funny? "Tell me about the orphanage. Are there many children?"

"Only ten. Seven girls and three boys. Eight are in school, and there are two toddlers who are still home all day. I take care of them to give the matron the day off so she can take care of things around the property and handle any personal matters. She really only has to really work with the children in the evenings then."

"I'm sure that makes her days a lot easier."

Sarah Jane forked up a bite of the pot roast on her plate. "Oh, it does. She would never have time for herself otherwise. I'm not sure how Mrs. Hayes did it with all of us."

Evelyn, who was twenty and helped out at the school, grinned. "She was good at delegating. I spent a lot of time changing diapers, and you spent a lot of time cooking. Opal helped everyone with their homework. She used all of our strengths to make things easier on herself."

Sarah Jane smiled. "And here I thought she was teaching us to be good, responsible adults."

"Oh, she was. In the most effective way possible. Trial and error." Evelyn shrugged. "She was good at what she did."

"Obviously. I never even realized."

Micah looked around the table. "So all of you grew up together. Do you ever fight?"

"Constantly," Theresa said. "We all fight with Gertrude. She's bossy."

Gertrude glared at Theresa. "I'm not bossy! I just know better ways to do things than you do!"

Edna Petunia grinned, removing a peppermint stick from her cleavage to stir her tea. "Just be careful they don't start throwing peas at each other, Pastor."

Hope shook her head. "We do not throw peas, Edna Petunia. We were raised better than that. We catapult them." She took a pea and set it on the tip of her spoon, flinging it through the air so it bounced off Sarah Jane's forehead. "Like that!"

Edna Petunia glared at Hope. "No more." Her words were soft, but they were spoken with emphasis.

Micah shook his head. It was like being home with his sisters, but there were more of them. It was mass pandemonium. He wasn't certain if he felt nostalgic or overwhelmed. Probably a bit of both.

After the meal, he was invited to sit in the parlor and visit. Sarah Jane didn't have to clean the dishes. She said something about how anyone who cooks didn't have to clean in their house.

"Sounds fair to me," he told her. He thought it was odd she was explaining herself, but said nothing about it.

When he got to the parlor, he sat down with Sarah Jane, Edna Petunia, and Cletus, who had once again picked up his law book.

"What are you reading now, you old coot?" Edna asked, her voice full of love.

"Law books."

"Still? You think you can get this town to elect you judge? After all the years you lived like a hermit in the woods?"

Cletus shrugged. "Yup. My family name means a lot around here, and I'm still the richest man around. I'm a family man now."

Edna shrugged. "They couldn't get a better man for the job."

Cletus leaned over and gave Edna Petunia a loud smacking kiss

on the cheek. "You're something else."

Edna put her hand on his shoulder, pushing him away. "Get away, you crazy old man."

Micah shook his head, laughing. "Sarah Jane told me you two have only been married for three years. It's hard to believe."

"Why?" Edna Petunia asked. "Because we're older than dirt?"

Micah wasn't certain how to respond to that. "Mostly because of how you act around each other. I'd have thought you'd been married for fifty years."

Cletus patted Edna Petunia. "I think the boy's complimenting us. Don't get your back feathers ruffled."

"Of course it's a compliment. I admire you both. You did something special, taking in fifteen orphans the way you did."

Edna shook her head. "They did something special for *me*, coming to live here. I've always had a real soft spot for bastard children." She smiled over at Sarah Jane, who was doing her best not to cringe. "Even though most of them were born in wedlock, which is disappointing, this group needs love more than most."

Micah was confused. "Why does it matter if they're bastards? Didn't you just want to take in orphans?"

"Well, sure, but there's just something sweeter and more magical about a bastard. Don't you think?"

Micah blinked a couple of times. Was she serious? "I suppose."

Cletus shook his head. "Don't mind Edna Petunia. She's got it in her head that bastards need more love than other children, and she can't seem to get it out. She tries to look at all of our girls as bastards, even though most of them aren't, but just lost their parents at a young age."

"I'm not sure I follow, but I'm not certain I need to. As long as you're taking care of orphans, I'm thrilled." Micah frowned at Sarah Jane. "You don't make the older ones leave when they reach a certain age, do you?"

"Of course not!" Edna exclaimed. "Our oldest orphan is Evelyn, and she's already twenty! If we haven't made her leave, we won't make the younger ones leave."

That still didn't tell Micah how old Sarah Jane was, and for some reason, the answer to that question was important to him. "How many girls do you have who are over eighteen?" he asked tentatively.

Sarah Jane answered. "The oldest two are already married. Then there are five of us here who are older than eighteen. I was eighteen in September."

Micah felt a sense of relief. He knew that many women married at sixteen or even younger, but in his head, no one was old enough to marry before the age of eighteen. He was starting to feel attracted to

Sarah Jane, and he didn't want to feel like he was doing something wrong.

"What are your intentions toward Sarah Jane?" Cletus asked, looking between the two of them.

Micah wasn't surprised the older man sensed his interest in the girl. "I intend to pick up the Santa Claus outfit from her in the morning," he said. "Beyond that, I have no plans. Maybe I should take her to get some hot chocolate from the ice cream parlor when she finishes at the orphanage tomorrow, though." He looked at Sarah Jane, hoping she'd take his words as the invitation they were.

Sarah Jane blushed. Was the pastor showing an interest in her? She didn't know if she was ready for that. "I suppose we could get hot chocolate."

"I'll drive you home after. What time do you finish up there?" he asked.

"Three, which is really early. I'll understand if you have something else you need to do."

He shrugged. "I'm visiting a couple of sick families in the early afternoon. It would be no trouble at all to come by the orphanage to take you for hot chocolate at three." He looked at Cletus, who was watching them both with an eagle eye. "I'll have her home by five at the very latest."

Cletus nodded. "That suits me. Closer to four would be better, though."

"Who will be there to chaperone?" Sarah Jane blurted out.

"Do you feel the need to be chaperoned with me?" Micah asked. Was she afraid of him?

Sarah Jane shook her head. "It's not that. I just don't want anyone to think that something improper is going on."

"Does it matter so much?" He was surprised she was thinking of chaperones when the idea of one hadn't even occurred to him.

"Well, I learned from the pastor I lived with for a couple of years that a rumor can ruin a clergyman's career. I wouldn't want that to happen to you. There are plenty of tongues that would wag at seeing the handsome young pastor riding out of town with the orphan girl. I could walk home after the hot chocolate, though. Then it wouldn't matter."

He shook his head. "No, but I appreciate you for thinking of that. Why don't we take one of the other girls with us?"

"Maybe Penelope? She works at the mercantile in the afternoons, and it wouldn't be a hardship for her to come." Sarah Jane was closest in age to Penelope, who was only a month older than she was. They had a good relationship.

Micah nodded. "Of course. Whomever you would like to be with

us." He stood. "I should get back to town. Thank you for lunch, Mr. and Mrs. Sanders."

Edna Petunia nodded, but didn't stand. "You're welcome anytime, Pastor. Just drop by at mealtimes. There's always enough."

"Thank you. I may take you up on that." He walked toward the door.

Edna Petunia looked at Sarah Jane, making odd hand motions again.

This time, Sarah Jane understood her. She got to her feet. "Let me walk you out, Pastor."

"Please, call me Micah."

"Oh, I couldn't. That's far too informal."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "If you don't call me Micah, then I can't call you Sarah Jane, and I like the way the name feels on my tongue far too much to forgo the privilege. You wouldn't want to make me feel uncomfortable by calling you by your Christian name while you call me by my title, would you?"

Sarah Jane smiled at that. "I'll call you Micah, then."

"Good!" They walked side by side out to his buggy. "Thanks again for lunch. I really enjoyed it."

"I'm glad you came," she said simply, wondering if she was being too forward. He *was* the most sought-after man around, and she didn't want him to think she was making a play for him like many of the other young ladies.

He reached out and briefly touched her cheek before getting into his buggy. "I'll see you tomorrow afternoon. I'll just pick up the suit when I see you for hot chocolate."

"That seems sensible. Goodbye." She raised a hand to wave to him before he drove off. Once he was out of sight, she raised a hand to her cheek where he'd touched her. Where had the hope that he'd kiss her come from?

* * *

Sarah Jane had a difficult morning with the two orphans who were in the home during the day. Little Zachariah hadn't been feeling well, and she'd had to spend the day fetching medicine for him and coddling him.

By the time Micah arrived to take her for ice cream, she was worn out. She wanted to cancel, but she didn't know how to do it in such a way that she wouldn't offend him, and he would ask her again.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

She nodded tiredly. "Let me get my things." She had brought her small drawstring purse with her, and she hurried to get it along with the Santa suit which was wrapped in brown paper.

She rushed back to him, and he helped her up into the buggy, while she fought back a yawn.

"Didn't you sleep well?" he asked, watching her as he climbed into the buggy beside her for the short ride to the ice cream parlor.

"I did. One of the orphans was sick this morning, and he wanted me to carry him around and pace back and forth. It took a lot out of me."

"I'm sorry you're tired. Do you want to do this tomorrow instead?"

Sarah Jane thought about it. Ten minutes before, she was certain that was what she wanted, but now they were sitting together in his buggy, she wasn't so sure. "No, I think I can manage." She'd just go to sleep earlier than usual. It wouldn't hurt her not to read that night before bed.

"Where's Penelope? You did say she'd be the one chaperoning us, didn't you? Do I have the name right?"

"Yes, you do. She said she had a rush order to finish, but we could pick her up after we finish. She would be ready by then. The main thing I was worried about was having someone with us when we weren't in a public area, so that should be just fine."

He nodded. "I think that's a good compromise." He pulled up in front of the ice cream parlor, thrilled they were serving hot chocolate during the colder months. Jumping down, he walked around to help her to the ground. He took her elbow in his hand as he led her into the parlor, though he felt awkward doing so because he wasn't used to escorting women.

Once they were inside, he led her to a small table in the corner and pulled a chair out for her. He sat opposite. "So tell me about you. How did you come to live in the orphanage in New York?"

She made a face. "My parents and younger brother all died from the measles when I was four, and I moved to the orphanage then. I had no other family who could raise me."

"And you lived there until you moved to Texas?" Hadn't she said something about living with a pastor?

"When I was nine, a pastor and his wife took me in for a while. They meant to keep me, but they were called to go west a year and a half later, and they decided it would be easier to get an orphan child once they were there rather than taking one on the long journey with them."

Micah frowned. "So any orphan would do? It didn't have to be you?"

"They were good people. They taught me a lot." She wouldn't let him say anything bad about the couple.

"I see. Do you ever hear from them?"

Sarah Jane shook her head. "They thought it would be easier for

me to transition into living in the orphanage again if they didn't write." She still missed them, though.

Micah thought they were callous people to be able to leave her at the orphanage after living with her for so long, but he said nothing. The waitress was there, and he asked her to bring them each a hot chocolate.

"I could never drop off a child I couldn't keep at a children's home like someone would dump a pet they no longer wanted in the country."

"It wasn't like that!" she protested, thinking he was taking her words in a way she hadn't intended.

"I'm sorry. I just hate the idea of you being left twice. Once is enough."

"I was loved at that orphanage. The matron cared about all of us. It was better than most, I'm sure."

Micah nodded, deciding that he wouldn't say another word about it. "Tell me about the Christmas party I'm going to dress up for."

Sarah Jane smiled. "It was my idea. We're going to have all the volunteers there. I asked the businesses in town to each donate a gift or two. Edna Petunia has been sewing, and so has Mrs. Hayes. There will be plenty of gifts for all the children."

"What activities are planned, other than Santa giving gifts?"

"The children have been practicing some Christmas carols they'll sing for us. Many members of the church will be there. We'll have punch and cookies." She would make the cookies herself on Friday to have them ready. "It's only going to last a couple of hours. At the end of the party, we'll have Santa come in and give the children their gifts."

"So I shouldn't come until the end of the party?"

"I was thinking you should come for the Christmas carols, and then make your excuses so you can change into the suit."

He nodded. "I could do that." The hot chocolate was set on the table before them. He reached out and took a sip from the mug in front of him. "You'll save me some cookies?"

She laughed. "I'll bake an extra dozen just for you."

"I'd like that a lot," he told her with a grin. "I'm pretty fond of sweets."

"Well, between me and Edna Petunia, we'll keep you supplied. We both enjoy baking a great deal."

"I'd appreciate it." Suddenly, he understood the loneliness other men from the seminary had talked about after graduation. He was in a good place here in Nowhere, but what if there hadn't been people around to pander to his every whim? "What are your plans now?"

"Plans? I suppose I'll keep volunteering with the orphans. I enjoy

working there, and I don't need to be making money." She shrugged. "Most of the girls start working as soon as they finish school to save as much as they can, but I'm not certain why. I don't need anything that's not provided for me, and I'd rather do some good."

"So money isn't important to you?"

"Well, it's important that someone around me has it so I can eat and wear clothes, but I'm not one who thinks she needs to have jewels dripping from her or a huge house to live in. I'm content with little."

She sounded like she'd be a perfect pastor's wife. "You're a logical woman."

"Most of the time. My family thinks I go overboard in trying to be good, though."

"Is that even possible?"

She laughed. "Well, sometimes I try to force how I feel about certain things on them, even when they're not technically doing anything wrong. That makes them angry."

He smiled. "Like needing a chaperone?"

"Exactly." She looked down at her hot chocolate for a moment, worried she'd offended him. "Did that bother you?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. I appreciate you thinking that way. I would have never given it another thought."

"The Pinkstons pounded their way of thinking into my head."

"The pastor and his wife?"

She nodded. "Yes. They made it very clear that it was my responsibility to worry about others' souls as well as my own."

"That's a big burden. Does it ever bother you?"

She frowned. "Burden? I never thought of it that way, I guess. To me, it's just what I'm supposed to be doing."

"It's my job now, so you can drop that burden from your shoulders." He hated the idea that she felt like other people's souls were her responsibility. She wasn't a preacher, so she shouldn't have to feel that guilt.

He saw that she was finished with her hot chocolate, so he went to the counter to pay. Walking back, he smiled. "Are you ready?"

She nodded, sad their time was over. She wanted to get to know him better, but she'd spent the whole time answering his questions. "What was your family like?"

He shrugged, taking her elbow again to walk her to the buggy. "I've told you all there is to tell. Our house was loud."

Sarah Jane grinned. "I bet it wasn't as loud as ours."

He laughed, shaking his head. "No, not nearly as loud as that."

"It's a lot, but Edna Petunia is a good mother to us all. Well, when she's not trying to get us to drink her 'cough syrup."

"Cough syrup? It's not whiskey, is it?"

She shrugged. "Early on, Mrs. Hayes warned us not to drink it, so none of us ever has. We're pretty sure it's some kind of spirit."

He sighed. "You'd think a woman that age would know better. Does she cough a lot?"

Sarah Jane shook her head, her eyes twinkling. "Never. She says that just goes to prove it's working."

"That sounds like Mrs. Sanders. The woman is a bit off."

"She is, but she's the most loving person I've ever met." Sarah Jane leaned close to whisper, "She offered me peppermint sticks in church yesterday."

He laughed, concentrating on driving toward the mercantile, but wishing he could watch her as they talked. "And did you take one?"

Sarah Jane shook her head. "I told her I don't think we should be eating candy during service, so she ate it herself."

"Of course she did." He pulled up in front of the mercantile. "Do you want me to go in and get Penelope?"

"No, I want to talk to Ruby—she married the owner of the mercantile. You can come in or wait here."

He walked around the wagon to help her down. "I'll come in. I've met Ruby, but I had no idea she's one of your sisters."

"Oh, yes." Sarah Jane hurried into the store. When she saw Ruby behind the counter, she rushed over to chat for a moment. "Ruby. You look beautiful!"

Ruby smiled, patting her huge stomach. "Another five weeks or so, and this one will be here. Lewis is upstairs with the twins. I needed a moment without them."

Sarah Jane smiled. "Before today, I don't know if I could have understood that. One of the orphans was sick, though, and he was so clingy. I'm exhausted."

"It's hard when they're sick." Ruby sighed. "I hear you're stepping out with the new pastor."

Sarah Jane blushed. "Not really. He had to come pick up the Santa suit for the orphans' party this weekend, and he took me to get hot chocolate while he was out."

Ruby grinned. "And he couldn't have found someone else to take out for hot chocolate?"

Micah stepped up behind her. "I could have, but I wanted to take Sarah Jane."

"I thought that might be the case," Ruby said with a smile. "I always pictured Sarah Jane being a preacher's wife someday."

Sarah Jane gasped. "You're jumping to conclusions, Ruby."

"Not entirely," Micah responded with a laugh.

She looked at him with wide eyes. "But...we barely know each other."

"We're working on that."

Sarah Jane had no idea what to say to that, so she remained quiet. After a moment of the two of them looking at her, she blushed. "I'll tell Penny we're ready."

He nodded, saying nothing as he watched her walk away.

"You really like her," Ruby said.

Micah smiled. "She's pretty special. I think you're right about her making a good preacher's wife, and I know a preacher who's just about ready to settle down."

"Do you now?" Ruby laughed at him. "I think you need to make your intentions very clear. Our Sarah Jane doesn't understand subtleties very well."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Chapter Three

On the drive back to the Sanders' home, Micah wanted to bring up his intentions to court Sarah Jane, but he didn't want to do it in front of Penny. Penny was chatting about her day, probably just to fill the silence.

Once they pulled up in front of the house, Penny jumped down and ran inside, leaving the two of them alone. "Would you mind sitting here for a bit? I'd like to talk for a moment."

Sarah Jane was surprised by his request. "You could stay for supper if you want."

"I might, but first I want to talk to you where no one can overhear." He took a deep breath, nervous about the conversation they were about to have. "I thought I was making myself clear when I invited you out for hot chocolate today, but Ruby told me I should spell it out for you. I want to start courting you. Would you be all right with that?"

Sarah Jane blinked a couple of times. "Courting me?"

He nodded. "To see if we're compatible."

For marriage? He's interested in marrying me? "I think that would be all right. You should probably talk to Cletus, though. He's overprotective of all of us."

Micah looked toward the house with a frown. "I can do that. I guess I'll stay for supper after all."

Sarah Jane bit back a giggle at the look on his face. She rested her hand on his arm. "He doesn't bite. You'll be fine."

Micah sighed. "I'm sure I will be. I just—well, I just wish I could find a way to talk just to him and not Mrs. Sanders and all of the girls."

"Your best time to try is right now. I'll be in the kitchen helping Edna Petunia cook, and most of the girls prefer to take advantage of the free time they have between work and supper."

Micah jumped down, walking around to help Sarah Jane to the ground. He'd never liked the idea of asking a father for permission to court a girl because he thought the girl should be allowed to make up her own mind about it.

Sarah Jane led him back to the formal parlor, where Cletus was again reading law books. It was odd to Micah that he would want to start a new career at his age, but he had to respect Cletus for it.

"Mr. Sanders?"

Cletus looked up. "You again? Well, come in and sit down, as long as you're not here to tell me that my soul needs savin'. I heard enough of that when I was young."

Micah smiled. "No, sir. Not this time." He cleared his throat, forcing out the next statement so he could get it over with. "I want to ask your permission to court Sarah Jane."

At that Cletus set down his book and gave the younger man his full attention. "Sarah Jane's an awfully special girl. You going to take care of her while you're out with her?"

Micah nodded. "I will."

"And you'll make sure you always have a chaperone? Normally, I wouldn't think that would be necessary, but it is in this case. Sarah Jane has some really old-fashioned ideas, and she likes for everyone around her to live by her ideals."

He nodded again. "I can see that. I will happily have a chaperone at all times if it makes her feel better."

"Then I guess you can court her. Treat her right. If I hear you've hurt her in any way, I'm going to come after you."

Micah wasn't a bit surprised by the older man's words. He seemed the type who would hunt down a man who harmed someone he loved. "I'll keep that in mind. I have no intention of hurting her or anyone else."

"Good. You better treat her like the precious jewel she is."

"Always." Micah was thrilled to have the conversation over with. "Sarah Jane invited me for supper."

"Of course she did. Sarah Jane feels the need to feed the world, just like my sweetheart, Edna Petunia. You'd never hear either of them admitting it, but out of all the girls, Sarah Jane is most like my wife. Oh, she doesn't run off at the mouth like Edna Petunia, but she has the same basic need to take care of others." Cletus smiled. "It's hard not to feel like she's extra special as a result of that."

Micah smiled. He could see the similarities for himself though he was pleased Sarah Jane didn't do some of the outlandish things Edna Petunia was constantly doing. "I can see it. I really will take good care of her."

"I know you will. You wouldn't dare do otherwise." Cletus picked up his book again. "I'm done talking for a while. If you want to read, there's a Bible on the shelf."

Micah grinned. He walked to the shelf of books along the wall, and chose one that interested him. It wasn't the Bible, but he didn't think Cletus would care. Settling back down into the chair he'd just vacated, he opened the book and began reading.

In the kitchen, Sarah Jane was peeling the potatoes for dinner. "Pastor Barton will be eating with us again."

Edna eyed Sarah Jane. "He courting you?"

Sarah Jane blushed. "He's asking Cletus for permission."

"Good. You two suit each other."

Sarah Jane looked at Edna Petunia with surprise. "Do you really think so?"

"Definitely. I thought so when he first moved here, but I was certain you'd have a problem with me trying to fix you two up together."

"I would have. You have to let things happen as they will."

"Because there are no arranged marriages in the Bible?" Edna Petunia asked, a smirk on her face.

"We don't live in Bible times any longer. Why, look at the modern world around you. We even have indoor plumbing and electricity here!"

"We do. It's a pretty nice place to live, this modern world of ours. I'm happy here."

Sarah Jane smiled at that, setting the huge pot of potatoes on the stove to boil.

Edna Petunia was frying some chicken on the second stove. "Why don't you whip up a couple of cakes? The pastor would probably enjoy some baked goods. It's got to be hard for a bachelor to move to such a small town where there's not a bakery or anything."

Sarah Jane nodded. "I'll bake three cakes so he can have one to take home with him."

"That's the spirit, girl! No faster way to a man's heart than through his stomach. Unless, of course, you're planning on kissing him, but knowing you, that won't be happening anytime soon."

"I don't think people should just run around kissing each other. If we were engaged, it would be different."

"Well, how are you going to know if you want to be with him for all time if you don't kiss him? You have to know if he makes your heart speed up!"

Sarah Jane shook her head. "I'll know." She already knew he did. Every little touch, even if he was just helping her into her buggy, made her feel special.

Edna Petunia's face broke into a wide grin. "He's already made your heart beat faster. He's the man for you. I'm glad." She turned a piece of chicken on the stove. "Bake those cakes, girl. I want to see the two of you married soon!"

Sarah Jane sighed. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Edna Petunia. He may not have feelings for me."

"He wouldn't be in there asking that old coot for permission to court you otherwise."

Sarah Jane just nodded as she measured out the sugar. It was odd to think that she'd be the next one courted when there were so many older than her still at home. Still, she was thrilled. There was just something about Micah that made her want to be with him all the

time.

At dinner, he sat beside her again, and he took her hand automatically while they prayed. Sarah Jane felt as if she were doing something wrong, but she was holding Evelyn's hand on the other side, and she knew that wasn't wrong. She'd never made a habit of holding a man's hand before. Why, she'd never been courted at all before. Micah was the first.

After the prayer, she pulled her hand from his, not meeting his eyes. She didn't want him to realize that it affected her when they held hands, even during prayer.

Cletus forked up a bite of his mashed potatoes before his eyes landed on Micah. "So, what does a preacher do all day?"

Micah felt put on the spot, but answered anyway. "I spend part of the day visiting the sick. I work on my sermon. Do any repairs necessary on the church. Basically, I work just like everyone else. My tasks are just a bit different."

"Do you enjoy your work?" Edna Petunia asked. "Does it ever get to be too much of a trial to have to do good all the time? I mean, at times doing good is fun and makes you feel pleasant, but sometimes it just gets downright tedious."

Micah couldn't hide the smirk. "I like doing good, so no, it doesn't bother me. It's hard to always have to worry about what other people will think of what I'm doing, but usually that's easy as well."

Sarah Jane smiled as she took a bite of her chicken. Micah thought very much the same way she did. Maybe someday they could get to know one another well enough that they could marry.

Hope wrinkled her nose. "You sound just as boring as Sarah Jane. I sure hope you won't ask me to chaperone you two. I'm not sure I could stay awake for it."

Edna Petunia sighed. "Don't be rude, Hope. Not everyone is good at saying whatever is on their mind, and it's a good thing. Imagine what the world would be like if we all told people when their shoes were ugly or we found their conversation boring. Not a good place."

Hope looked down at her plate for a moment before her eyes met Sarah Jane's across the table. "I'm sorry for being rude."

Sarah Jane wanted to kick her, but instead, she gave the reply she always knew she must. "I forgive you."

Micah shook his head. It was hard to believe all the personalities from the girls had come from the same upbringing. Where Sarah Jane was quiet and sweet, some of the others were downright rude. He didn't really know Hope at all, but she seemed very judgmental, a trait that he'd assigned to older women in the Christian congregation, not to young ladies of his acquaintance.

After supper, Sarah Jane walked Micah out to his buggy. "How

did your talk with Cletus go?" she asked, almost embarrassed to do so. It was hard for her to know what was too forward and what wasn't.

He smiled at her. "He said we could court. I have to treat you right, though, because you're special to him."

"I'm sure he says that about all fifteen of us."

"I'm sure he does too, but today, you're the one he's worried about." He took a step closer to her. "You're the only one I'm worried about as well."

Sarah Jane looked up at him, surprised he was so close. She felt like she could melt into his brown gaze. "I like your eyes." As soon as the words were out, she wished she could get them back. Now he would definitely think her forward.

"I like yours too. They're a beautiful shade of green." He smiled at her. "May I kiss you?"

Sarah Jane felt her heart pounding in her chest as she shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea. The couple I lived with, the pastor and his wife, told me I should save lip kisses for after I'm married."

"They probably have the right of it." He sighed. "Doesn't stop a man from hoping, though."

She blushed. "I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"Truthfully, I'm a bit disappointed in one way, but in another, I'm pleased. If you feel that strongly, that means that you haven't kissed any other men either. I like that idea."

"You do?"

He nodded. "I do. I like everything about you, Sarah Jane. May I give you a ride home tomorrow?"

She frowned. "I'll see if one of the girls can chaperone us again."

He brushed her cheek with his fingertips in farewell, needing to touch her just for a moment. With her hard and fast rules about not kissing and never being alone, he wasn't certain if he'd be able to wait long before he asked for her hand in marriage. She was special. He was pretty sure he wasn't in love, but thought he could be soon. So far, it seemed to be just a strong attraction.

As he drove off, he couldn't help but think of her standing outside watching him. He didn't turn to be certain she was. He was afraid she'd already gone back inside and forgotten all about him.

Sarah Jane watched as he drove into the copse of trees just past their driveway. Once he was out of sight, she went back into the house. The dishes were being done, and there was much laughter accompanying them. Instead of going into the kitchen to join the others, she climbed the stairs to her bedroom. Thankful she no longer shared a room, she stretched out on her bed fully dressed, one arm over her eyes as she lay on her back atop the covers.

She'd never had strong feelings for a man before, but she couldn't get Micah Barton out of her head. Why, she was certain he was the man God had created just for her. How could he not be?

* * *

The following day, there was a new little girl at the orphanage. She'd been transferred from the orphanage in another Texas city, but there were no reasons given why she'd been transferred. She was six years old.

Really, she reminded Sarah Jane of how she'd looked when she was younger. Her hair was in blond ringlets, and her eyes were bright blue.

"What's your name?" Sarah Jane asked softly. She had the paperwork the woman who'd delivered her had brought, but she hadn't looked at it yet. She found it was easier if the child would talk about herself.

"Most people call me Chrissy."

"I like that name. I'm Sarah Jane."

"You have two names! I do too, but most people only use one."

"What are your two names?" Sarah Jane asked as she took the little girl's hand and led her into the room all the girls shared. She pointed to a bed that was vacant, and the little girl sat on it and bounced a couple of times.

"Christmas Carol."

"Oh, that's pretty!"

"My birthday is Christmas."

"Then the name suits you beautifully. Do you want to be called Chrissy?"

The girl nodded. "It's easier than Christmas Carol. Do you have any little girls, Sarah Jane?"

Sarah Jane shook her head. "Not yet, but I hope I will someday. I want one just like you."

Chrissy giggled. "I think you should have a lot of little girls just like me."

"Well, let me tell you about the Christmas party we're having here at the orphanage on Saturday." Sarah Jane talked to the little girl while she fed her and did an inventory of her clothing. Chrissy had less than most of the orphans did, and there was no present arranged for her. She'd have to ask Edna Petunia to make her a pretty dress.

"What do you want for Christmas? I need to make a list."

"A home."

Sarah Jane frowned. "You'll have a home here. Are there any toys you want?"

Chrissy shrugged. "Mostly I just want a mother and father who

will love me, but I'll take a baby doll if that's too much to ask."

Sarah Jane wanted to keep her forever. Never had she felt so strongly that she wanted to keep an orphan child. She had no idea why this one was different, but she was. She wanted to cry for the little girl. She remembered being her age and wanting nothing more than parents who would love her as their own. All she could think about was how she could make enough money to adopt the little girl in front of her. Of course, for now, she'd just have to go to the store and get her a baby doll.

When it was time for Micah to pick her up, she put her coat on, promising Chrissy she'd be back the next day. She wanted little Christmas Carol to be hers, and she had to find a way to do it.

* * *

As they drove to the school to pick up one of the other girls, Micah frowned at Sarah Jane. "You seem sad today."

She shook her head. "I'm not sad. I'm just thinking. There's a new orphan today, and I want to keep her forever."

"Would the Sanders let you bring her home?"

"Oh, I'm sure they would, but I don't want *them* to adopt her. I want to adopt her, and I'm in no position to do it. I don't know why, but that little girl has grabbed onto my heart and just won't let go."

"So what will you do?"

She shrugged. "I have no idea. I'm racking my brain for ways I could support both of us. I'm a good cook, and I could do meal delivery for bachelors in town because we have more than our share. But I don't know how safe that would be."

He frowned. "I don't like the idea of you delivering meals to strangers. I think you need to let the idea go for now. She's going to be well cared for at the orphanage."

"I know she will. It's not that. I feel like she was sent here to be mine. I know that sounds stupid, but it's true."

"It doesn't sound stupid." Micah wasn't certain what to say to her, but the idea of her adopting a child when she was eighteen and hadn't married—well, it just didn't make sense to him.

When he dropped her and Dorothy off at the house, he asked, "Will you promise me not to do anything in a hurry? Talk to me about it first?"

Sarah Jane nodded slowly. They were courting, and she owed it to him to at least let him know of any major plans before she went through with them. "I promise." Dorothy had disappeared into the house as soon as they'd arrived. "Will you stay for supper?"

He shook his head. "Not tonight, but thank you. I've been invited to eat with the Harveys."

"Andy or Francis?" she asked.

"Francis."

"Oh, tell Dr. Iris hello from me. She and Edna Petunia moved here together."

"I will." He cupped the side of her face in his hand again, just as he'd done every time they'd said goodbye. "I'll drive you home again tomorrow."

Sarah Jane nodded. "I'd like that." Her mind was still far away, though. She wanted to adopt that little girl more than she'd ever wanted anything.

She hurried into the house and went to the kitchen, donning her apron.

"How was your day?" Edna Petunia asked.

Sarah Jane surprised the old woman by pouring her heart out over the little girl who'd arrived at the orphanage. "I just feel like I'm meant to adopt her. Almost like God's calling me to do it. I don't know if I should agree, but it feels like I should. You know?"

"You don't even have work! We can have her come here and live with us, though, if you feel that strongly about it."

Sarah Jane shook her head. "I knew you'd say that, but it's not what I want at all. I want to be her mother. I want to see to her every need. I don't want her to be just another one of the orphan girls who lives here."

Edna Petunia nodded. "I can understand that. If you change your mind, let me know." She hugged Sarah Jane tightly, something the younger girl didn't usually like, but this time, she clung.

"Was it hard for you to decide to take in all of us? Did it make Cletus mad?"

"Not hard at all. I knew the minute I found out there were fifteen bastard girls at the church that I wanted to keep each and every one of you." Edna Petunia shrugged. "I think Cletus would have preferred I chose one or two of you, but that's not my way, and he realized that quickly."

Sarah Jane nodded. "I wish I could feel the right thing to do. I thought maybe I could do a food delivery business to support us. There are a lot of bachelors in Nowhere, and I could take them meals for a fee."

Edna Petunia frowned. "That doesn't sound safe. I don't like that idea at all."

"That's what Micah said." Sarah Jane returned to her work, wishing there was some magical answer.

Throughout the evening, all Sarah Jane could think about was little Chrissy, and how she wanted to make her life special. She thought of several ways she could support the girl, but every one of

them was either dangerous, or wouldn't make enough money to support her and a child. There had to be something, though.

She'd keep trying and praying about it, and God would surely give her an answer. If she and Micah had been courting longer, they could marry and adopt her, but they just didn't know one another well enough. He was a pastor, after all, and he needed to marry someone of the highest moral standards. She knew that described her well, but he needed to know her better to realize that

she would be a good wife for him.

Chapter Four

By the time Saturday rolled around, Sarah Jane was ready to give up her spot in the Sanders' home for Chrissy, but that wouldn't get the girl any closer to having her for a mother.

The first part of the party was a huge success. True to her name, little Chrissy could sing any carol they mentioned. She had the voice of an angel, and Sarah Jane wondered if she could get her singing lessons with Katie, the youngest of the orphans.

Chrissy spent the evening clinging to Sarah Jane's hand and was introduced to everyone in town. When it came time for Santa to pass out gifts, they went from the youngest to the oldest, which put Chrissy's turn at third. The younger two were excited, completely absorbed with the toys they were given.

Micah made a wonderful Santa Claus and Sarah Jane wished she had a photographer there so she could always remember this night and how he looked in the Santa suit, his brown eyes full of laughter above his white beard.

Seeing him play Santa Claus made Sarah Jane's heart fall that last little bit over the edge of the cliff. She loved him. There was no denying it any longer. If only he could love little Chrissy the way she did, she knew they'd make a perfect family.

When it was Chrissy's turn for Santa, Sarah Jane led her over by the hand and helped her to climb onto his lap. She stayed beside them, wanting to hear everything the little girl had to say.

Micah's voice had taken on a much deeper tone than usual as part of his role as Santa. "Hello, little girl. What do you want for Christmas?"

Instead of asking for the doll Sarah Jane had wrapped and put under the tree, Chrissy told Santa her whole story. She told of her mother not knowing who her daddy was and how she'd finally left her at the orphanage. She told him all she really wanted was a family who would love her as their own. Sarah Jane felt tears pop into her eyes as she listened to the little girl, and Micah looked up at her, his eyes obviously anguished at the girl's story.

Finally, he took the brightly wrapped package that Sarah Jane ready and gave it to Chrissy. She walked away, looking at the present as if afraid it would bite her. She'd obviously seen Santa as her chance to get what she really wanted for Christmas.

Micah's eyes met Sarah Jane's. "We need to talk after the party," he whispered.

She nodded as she guided the next little boy to see Santa.

* * *

After his time as Santa, Micah went to talk to Mr. Sanders, still in

his suit. "I need to speak with to Sarah Jane tonight. Is it all right if I take her home, along with whatever other girl you want to send with me, but we have a private discussion in your parlor? I don't want to break any of your rules, but this is important."

Cletus nodded slowly. "Just don't try any canoodling or anything. I've got a shotgun, and I know how to use it."

"I will be on my best behavior." Micah decided he wouldn't sit close enough to her even to hold her hand. He didn't want to betray the older man's trust.

He was quiet on the ride home, not certain how to bring up what he was planning to do. It was late, much later than he'd ever been at her house, and they all needed to be up early for church, so he knew he needed to talk fast.

When they arrived, Katie jumped down and ran into the house, and he walked around to help Sarah Jane down. "Mr. Sanders told me we could talk in the formal parlor, and he'd make sure we had no interruptions."

Sarah Jane studied him in the dark, wondering what he wanted to say that was so important. "All right." She followed him into the house and to the back parlor, where Cletus and Edna Petunia were talking.

As soon as he saw them, Cletus got to his feet. "Come on, Edna Petunia. These young 'uns need to talk without us here." Edna Petunia looked from Sarah Jane to her husband. "I told the pastor they could make use of the room to talk, but *not* to canoodle."

Edna Petunia smiled. "You know, Cletus, sometimes I think my outspoken ways are rubbing off on you. I like it."

Sarah Jane watched them go with a half-smile on her face. "Those two are something else. I learn more about them every day."

Micah sat down on the couch, indicating the chair for her. "I don't want anyone to say we did anything improper. I promised Mr. Sanders."

Sarah Jane nodded. "You're starting to frighten me a bit. What is so important that we talk about it tonight?"

"Is Christmas Carol the new girl at the orphanage? The one you feel compelled to adopt?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes. She goes by Chrissy. From the moment I met her, I just knew she was supposed to be mine."

Micah ran his fingers through his hair. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

"Why?" What was going on in his head?

"I feel the same way. I feel like she's supposed to be mine. That it's my job to go to town and adopt her right this second."

Sarah Jane bit her lip. She hated the idea of him taking Chrissy from her. *I saw her first!* "I don't know if there's a law against it, but I

certainly don't think it would be proper for a bachelor to adopt a young girl."

"I agree. And that's why I need you to marry me. We could take the buggy into Austin on Monday. I have a friend from seminary there who would marry us."

"But, we can't just leave together with no chaperone."

"Could you talk to the orphanage and get permission to take Chrissy?" he asked, forcing himself to call her by her nickname. He wanted to call her Christmas Carol and nothing else.

"I could. When would we go?" She knew he was only asking her so they could adopt the little girl, but it didn't seem to matter. She wanted to be his wife.

"Monday. I have to give my sermon in the morning, and we'll need to make arrangements." He looked at her, studying her face. "You're all right with marrying quickly? Without having a huge wedding?"

She nodded. "I can wear Mrs. Hayes's wedding dress. She won't mind at all. Ruby wore it as well. Edna Petunia will complain, of course, because that's what she does."

"Why will she complain? She doesn't like me?"

Sarah Jane shook her head. "That doesn't seem to be it at all. She complains about us not giving her time to plan a proper wedding, and then she always says something about 'poor Mary Sullivan.' We all just nod like we know what she's talking about."

"I guess Ruby and Opal didn't give her what she would consider proper notice?"

"They didn't, and while she didn't get angry, she mumbled a lot. She made Katie promise there would be a reception even if there was a fast marriage. I have no idea why Katie, or why she made her promise, but Katie told her she'd do it. It was very strange."

"She seems like a special woman to me."

"She is." Sarah Jane felt odd sitting alone with him and knowing they'd be married in just a couple of days. "Have you asked Cletus for my hand yet?"

He shook his head. "I'll come over after church tomorrow and ask him. I'm sure he'll say yes."

"I'm sure of it too. I—I hope you don't want to marry me just for Chrissy."

He sighed. "You know, if not for Chrissy, I'd take my time about things, but I believe I'd be asking you to marry me anyway. I'm just accelerating things this way."

Sarah Jane bit her lip. "All right. I just don't want you to regret it after we're married."

"How could I regret marrying you?" He sat forward with his

forearms on his knees. "I truly care for you, Sarah Jane. I wouldn't ask otherwise."

She wanted to get up and dance at his words. "I think Chrissy is going to be very excited. Can we drive to the orphanage tomorrow to talk to her? After you've spoken with Cletus, of course."

"I think that's a wonderful idea. We'll take one of the girls." He got to his feet. "I don't suppose I can kiss you now, knowing we'll marry in two days?"

Sarah Jane tilted her head to one side, studying him for a moment before she nodded. "Yes, I think that would be all right." If he, a pastor, didn't see a problem with sealing their engagement with a kiss, then why should she?

She got to her feet and waited as he walked to her, his hands cupping her cheeks. She tilted her face up to his, waiting as he slowly lowered his head to brush his lips across hers. Her heartbeat sped up, and she wanted to lose herself in his arms. Instead, she took a step back. "You promised Cletus."

Micah nodded. "I like kissing you a great deal, Miss Jefferson."

Sarah Jane smiled. "I think I like it just as much, Pastor Barton."

He leaned down and kissed her one last time before he turned toward the front door. "Let Edna Petunia know I'm coming for lunch again. I've eaten more meals here than I have in all the other homes of the congregation put together."

"I'll make sure you want to eat at home as soon as we're married."

"I can't wait."

* * *

Micah had his talk with Cletus as Sarah Jane helped Edna Petunia in the kitchen after church on Sunday.

"I want to marry Sarah Jane," he announced as soon as he had the old man's attention.

"You do now? Are you going to be engaged for a decent amount of time? Or am I going to have to put up with my wife complaining about never getting to plan a wedding?"

Micah grinned. "I was hoping we could take one of the orphans into Austin tomorrow and just get it done."

Cletus groaned, running his hand through his hair. "Of course you want to just do it. You don't have to live with the old bat."

Micah coughed to hide a laugh at the man's description of his wife. "Old bat?"

"She turns into a crazy woman every time one of the girls marries without warning. I swear, I'm going to have to go live in the woods for a week." Cletus shook his head. "You're really making life hard for me, you know."

"I'm very sorry it makes your life hard, Mr. Sanders, but I really do want to marry her. Tomorrow." Micah wasn't feeling the least bit guilty for dragging Sarah Jane off so suddenly, though. He knew Cletus could deal with his wife.

"Fine. Marry her tomorrow. I'll deal with the cantankerous old bat."

Micah smiled, sincerely hoping that he and Sarah Jane's relationship would never get to the point where he called her a cantankerous old bat. He had a great deal of respect for her now. He hoped it would always be that way.

* * *

Katie rode with Micah and Sarah when they went to tell Chrissy what they'd decided to do. As soon as Chrissy saw Sarah Jane walking toward her, she seemed to know something special was happening. She looked at Micah, studying him carefully, and suddenly, her face lit up. "You were Santa!"

"I . . . uh . . ."

Sarah Jane grinned, leaning down to hug the girl. "He was. He's also the town's pastor. And you know what else?"

Chrissy shook her head. "What?"

"He's also my fiancé. We're getting married tomorrow."

"You are?" Chrissy smiled. "Then you can adopt me! Both of you!"

Micah laughed. "That's right. We want to pick you up in the morning so you can ride into Austin with us. Do you want to watch us get married?"

Chrissy nodded, her whole face filled with excitement. "Yes! Can I really go?"

"Absolutely!" Sarah Jane was excited to be able to take the girl. "I need to run in and talk to Mrs. Henderson to let her know I won't be in tomorrow."

Chrissy shrugged. "I'll wait here with my new daddy."

Sarah Jane hurried into the house and found Mrs. Henderson up to her elbows in soapy dish water. "I wasn't expecting to see you today, Sarah Jane."

"I know. I'm just here for a moment. I need to tell you that I won't be in tomorrow."

"Won't be in? Why ever not? You never miss coming to help me out, Sarah Jane!"

"I know, and I'm sorry to give you such short notice. I'm getting married tomorrow, and my fiancé and I want to adopt Chrissy."

"Your fiancé? That young man who's been picking you up all week after you finish here?"

Sarah Jane nodded. "I wondered if I could take Chrissy with me

so we have a chaperone. We're driving into Austin to get married."

"Why not have the pastor here marry you?" Mrs. Henderson asked, confusion on her face.

"Because I'm marrying the pastor here."

"Oh! I never got a good look at the young man who was picking you up. That's wonderful, Sarah Jane. I can certainly manage for a day or two without you."

"Thank you. Why don't you plan on me missing Tuesday as well, so if I come in, it will be a pleasant surprise?"

"That works for me. Do you want to take Chrissy with you now? You could make an earlier start that way."

Sarah Jane nodded. "I think she'll enjoy all the other girls as well. Let me run upstairs and get her things."

Sarah Jane went upstairs and carefully folded both of Chrissy's dresses and her nightgown. Her new doll had been placed with her head on Chrissy's pillow. Obviously, the doll had been more important than Chrissy had let on.

Sarah Jane carried the things down the stairs and out into the yard, where Micah and Chrissy were both waiting for her. "If you don't mind, would you give Chrissy a ride to my house as well? She's going to spend the night to make it easier for us to leave early tomorrow."

Micah smiled. "I'd be happy to!" He helped Sarah Jane into the buggy and then lifted Chrissy up to her. She settled Chrissy on her lap while Micah helped Katie.

Chrissy talked excitedly as they made the familiar drive out to the house. Edna Petunia came rushing out and took Chrissy into her arms. "A new granddaughter. How did God know I needed you?"

Chrissy gave Sarah Jane a helpless look as she was carried into the house.

Sarah Jane laughed at Micah. "I think those two are going to get along just fine."

Katie giggled. "Edna Petunia is going to ruin her."

Micah looked between the two giggling girls. "How will she ruin her?"

"At this very moment, I would be willing to bet that Chrissy is standing on a chair in the kitchen, wearing Sarah Jane's apron, and helping bake a cake. She'll be allowed to lick the spoon, and she'll feel like she's a princess before Edna Petunia's done with her."

Micah smiled. "As long as she's learning important skills, like how to bake, I'm happy."

Sarah Jane rolled her eyes. "You need both of us baking you cakes? Have you already gone through those cookies I gave you last night?"

"I ate them all before bed. They were delicious!"

"Cooking for this man is going to require all my energy. Poor Chrissy is going to have to go back to the orphanage to get some love."

Katie just giggled again before waving goodbye to Micah and going into the house.

Micah grinned at the smile on Sarah Jane's face. He'd never seen her as happy as she'd been since they'd talked about getting married and adopting Chrissy. "I'll be here at sunup. I'd like to make the whole trip in one day so we can sleep at my house tomorrow. It's three hours each way."

Sarah Jane nodded. "I'll be sure to pack enough food to make it through the day. Maybe you could come into the house for breakfast before we go, but I'll pack a picnic basket full for the rest of the day."

Micah nodded, smiling. "I'd like that. I'll be here early." He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. "I'm so glad I'm allowed to do that now."

Sarah Jane blushed. "I am too."

Micah got into his buggy, and she stood watching him go. At the last minute, he turned and waved, a smile lighting up his face.

Sarah Jane didn't know why he'd done that, but she didn't waste time thinking about it. She hurried into the house. "I need to borrow Mrs. Hayes's wedding dress," she told Edna Petunia. "I asked her about it at church this morning."

"Tino brought it by while you were out fetching my granddaughter. It's lying on your bed, all pressed and ready for you."

"Oh, thank you, Edna Petunia. I'll go and try it on, just in case Penny needs to fit it to me. It should be really close, though. I'm the same size Ruby was before the babies started coming."

Sarah Jane smiled at Chrissy, who seemed content to help stir the cake batter. Katie had known what was happening for certain. Edna Petunia didn't stray from her ways.

She hurried up the stairs and undressed quickly, pulling the dress over her head. It fit perfectly. Ruby had been a tad bit taller than her, so the dress needed to be hemmed, but other than that, it was just right. Penny could fix it in a moment, and then Sarah Jane would be ready for her wedding. She couldn't wait.

She hurried out into the hall, calling for Penny to come help her. Penny had been apprised of the situation, and she would know exactly what Sarah Jane needed.

Penny stepped into the hall and smiled. "You look beautiful in that dress!" She looked Sarah Jane over from head to toe, walking in a slow circle around her. "We need to hem it, but everything else looks perfect."

Sarah Jane nodded. "I came to the same conclusion."

"Come into my room with me. I'll pin it, and then you can take it

off. I'll have it ready before morning."

"Thank you so much for working quickly to make it happen. Micah is determined to marry tomorrow."

Penny grinned. "Of course he is. He has eyes, doesn't he? You're the prettiest girl in Nowhere."

Sarah Jane started to get her back up, hating that people saw her as nothing more than a pretty face. There was so much more to her than that. She realized that Penny was complimenting her, and forced herself to relax. "I hope he sees more than that, but we'll find out."

"So are you leaving first thing?"

"Yes. Chrissy is in the kitchen helping Edna Petunia bake."

"Of course she is! I'm sure Edna Petunia is walking on air to get another bastard child to love. And now a bastard grandchild!"

Sarah Jane grinned. "I don't know what it is with that woman and bastards. Too bad we're all planning to marry before having children. I bet she'd like more!"

Penny laughed. "She'd fill the town of Nowhere with bastards if we let her."

"We're not going to let her, though, are we?"

"How is anyone going to stop that crazy old woman from doing anything?"

"She changed our lives. She gave us love, a nice home, and enough money to do what we needed to do for the first time in our lives. I may not approve of everything she does, but I admire her and love her." Sarah Jane was worried it would seem like she was insulting Edna Petunia, and she wanted it made clear that she had a great deal of respect for her.

"Oh, of course! I feel the same."

As soon as the dress had been pinned, Sarah Jane slipped back into the dress she'd worn all day and went downstairs to see how Chrissy and Edna Petunia were getting on. She found them in the kitchen together, mixing frosting while they waited for the cake to finish baking.

"I'm glad I'm going to get a new mama and daddy," Chrissy told Edna Petunia.

"I am too. Every little girl deserves a special mama and daddy like Sarah Jane and Micah."

"Do you think it will be okay if I call them Mama and Daddy right away? Or should I wait a while?"

Edna Petunia tilted her head to one side, as if she was giving the matter a great deal of thought. "I think that would make them right proud. I can't imagine having a little girl as special as you for my own."

"But you have Sarah Jane as your little girl, and she's very special."

She's my new mama!"

"Yes, she is. You're right. You know, Sarah Jane was an orphan too. She came to live with me just three years ago. I was so happy to get her and the other girls. I'm an old woman, much too old to have babies of my own."

Chrissy nodded, her face serious. "Very old and wrinkled too."

"Yes, very old. So I wanted to have daughters, but I knew I was too old to have them, so I decided to adopt one or two children. And the next thing I knew, God brought me fifteen beautiful orphan girls, and put them on my church lawn. They had nowhere to go, so I didn't just get two girls. I got fifteen!"

"Wow! Did you want fifteen?" Chrissy asked.

"I wanted a million. God sure did know what He was doing when He sent those girls to me. Just like He knew what He was doing when He sent you to the orphanage here for Sarah Jane to find you."

"He did know. And my new daddy is just as special. God knew what I needed."

Edna Petunia held the bowl they'd been mixing the frosting in lower so Chrissy could dip her finger in and have a taste. "What do you think?"

"It's good! We're good cooks!"

"We are." Edna Petunia spotted Sarah Jane. "We decided if you're going to be driving all day on your wedding day, you should at least have some wedding cake to take with you."

Sarah Jane smiled. "And you made my favorite!"

"It's good, Mama!"

Sarah Jane hugged Chrissy tightly. "I'm sure it is! I can't wait to have some." She looked at Edna Petunia. "Do you need your kitchen helper to frost the cake? Or can I take her away and give her a bath? I need her clean for my wedding day!"

"Well, I need her, but I suppose you can take her off for a little bit. I'll wait to frost the cake until she's done with her bath and ready to help." Edna Petunia put down the mixing bowl. "While you two are taking care of that bath, I'll make you some fried chicken for the road tomorrow. We can't have all of you fainting from hunger. You might never make it to Austin!"

Sarah Jane took Chrissy's hand and led her up the stairs. She wasn't certain how much help the girl would need, so she got her water ready for her. "I'll go get your nightgown. Can you wash your hair by yourself?"

Chrissy nodded. "I'm good at washing my hair. I'll hurry."

By the time the girl had bathed and washed her hair, Sarah Jane had brought her nightgown back. "You're going to sleep in my room with me tonight. Would you like that?"

Chrissy smiled. "I would love that! Is Daddy coming over tonight to eat supper with us?"

"No, not tonight. Starting tomorrow, the three of us will eat all our meals together, though, because we'll be a family."

Chrissy threw her arms around Sarah Jane. "A family is the only thing I've ever wanted."

Chapter Five

True to his word, Micah was there early the next morning for breakfast with Sarah Jane, Chrissy, and the whole family. Sarah Jane and Edna Petunia had made pancakes and bacon for everyone, and they had just finished as the knock came at the front door.

Chrissy squealed when she heard it, calling out, "That's my daddy, so I'll get it!" She ran through the house in her nicest dress, which really needed to be replaced, and wrenched the door open. "Daddy! You're here!"

Micah smiled, bending down and picking up the little girl, hugging her tightly. "How'd you sleep?"

"Mama let me sleep with her, and I slept great!" Chrissy clung to his neck, obviously very happy to be in Micah's arms.

"She did, did she?" Micah's eyes met Sarah Jane's over the top of Chrissy's head, and Sarah Jane blushed.

"I'm one of the few here with my own room here, so it made sense for her to share with me." Sarah Jane didn't want him to think that she'd done anything special. She'd been taught from a young age that you don't brag about the good things you do. "Breakfast is ready. We were just waiting on you."

"Oh! I thought I was here in plenty of time. I'm sorry to keep everyone waiting."

"You didn't. We just finished a minute or two ago. Go on into the dining room, and Edna Petunia and I will get the food on the table. Do you drink coffee?"

"Only when I want to be able to act human throughout the day."

"One cup of coffee coming right up!" Sarah Jane said, hurrying to the kitchen. She wasn't a coffee drinker herself, but she loved the smell. She had no desire to get used to the bitter taste.

Micah grinned as he watched her rush into the kitchen. She was going to be a good wife to him. He could tell just by observing her with her family. He carried Chrissy into the dining room, put her on a chair, and sat down on one side of her. He knew that Sarah Jane would take the other side.

After breakfast, he took the picnic basket she and Edna Petunia had packed while she removed her apron, carefully folding it and putting it into the basket. She would need it later. She picked up her two carpet bags that held everything she owned, and he took the bag with Chrissy's few things in it. Sarah Jane hugged Edna Petunia. "Thanks for your help getting everything ready."

"I'm happy to help. I'd be happier if you'd waited a month or two to marry, but I really do understand why you couldn't." Edna Petunia

gave Chrissy a peppermint stick. "Come back this way tonight if you're hungry. I'll make enough for all of us."

Sarah Jane nodded. She had no idea how long it would take to get to Austin, let alone how long it would take to find a preacher to marry them. "We will if we have time."

Micah's eyes were full of laughter as he thanked Edna Petunia for the food. "We sure appreciate you being willing to feed us today. It's going to be a long day."

Edna Petunia nodded. "It's what? A three-hour drive to Austin?"

Micah shrugged. "Close to that. I figure we'll get there around ten or eleven, find a preacher, and have lunch outside town on the way back."

"Just make sure you keep my girls warm. Do you have enough quilts? I can send a couple more!"

"We'll be fine. I'll keep them safe and warm. You have no reason to worry, Mrs. Sanders."

Edna Petunia made a face. "You're going to be my son in a few hours. Might be time for you to call me Edna Petunia. Everyone else does."

Micah just nodded. "We'll be back soon."

He headed out to the buggy and helped Sarah Jane up before handing her Chrissy, who moved to sit in the middle of the seat.

Sarah Jane put her arm around Chrissy and made sure the lap quilt was tucked in well around her. Once Micah was seated, she gave him the other side to tuck around him. The day wasn't nearly as cold as a winter day in New York, but it was too chilly to be in the open wind.

While they drove, they peppered Chrissy with questions. "Do you know why you were brought here from the orphanage in Fort Worth?" Sarah Jane asked. She wanted to know as much as possible about the girl.

"They said there was no more room for girls, and someone needed to go. I said I would. I didn't mind."

"You volunteered? Why?" Sarah Jane had assumed one of the adults at the orphanage had chosen her to leave.

"Because I knew my new parents were waiting for me. I just had to find them. They weren't in Fort Worth."

Sarah Jane smiled at Micah over Chrissy's head. The child had been confident that she'd find her parents there in Nowhere, and she'd been right. Sarah Jane knew she and Micah would always put Chrissy first, and make sure she felt happy and safe in her new home.

"I'm glad you came here to us," Sarah Jane said. "I don't know what we would have done if you hadn't come along."

"Me neither," Micah added. "I may never have found the courage

to ask Sarah Jane to marry me. Why, I'd already been thinking about it for *hours* when you sat on my lap at that party."

"I was meant to be here to help you get together, and you were meant to be here to adopt me. God has a plan for everything."

"He certainly does!" Micah said with a smile. "You seem to know a lot about God."

"Well, sure. My last orphanage taught us about God every day. I learned a lot from them. I'm glad I'm going to be the daughter of a pastor so I can learn even more."

Eventually the buggy rocked little Chrissy to sleep, and she tipped over, putting her head on Sarah Jane's lap. "She's out," Sarah Jane whispered.

Micah glanced over and smiled. "I'm glad we're doing this."

"You're not nervous?" Sarah Jane asked, putting her hand over her belly where the butterflies were writhing and kicking.

He reached over and took her hand from where it rested on Chrissy's back. "I'm a little nervous, but mostly because I don't want to disappoint you. You're too special for me to upset."

Sarah Jane frowned. "I'm not special."

"Of course you are! God made you, didn't He?"

She smiled at him. "You make me feel like I'm special." She glanced down at Chrissy. "So does she. Why did she want us to be her parents so badly? I've asked other people, and there was no one else she was determined to have as her parents. Just the two of us."

He shrugged. "I have no idea."

Sarah Jane used her free hand to stroke Chrissy's hair. "She looks so angelic when she's asleep." She turned and looked at Micah. "Tell me about your house. Are you living in the parsonage in town?"

"I am. It's just a two-bedroom house." Micah bit his lip, thinking about the tight quarters. "If you'd like, you can share a room with Chrissy to begin with. Then when we know each other better, and we're more comfortable, you can move into my room. It might help her transition better."

"And help us transition better?" Sarah Jane asked with a smile. "Yes, I think that's a wonderful idea. I'll be a good wife in every other way."

"I really do think that's for the best. And I have no doubt you'll be a fine wife. I was at the party you organized the other night. I've never seen anything like it."

"I worked on that for over a month. I think we'll be good partners."

He smiled at her, bringing her hand to his lips. "I do too. You're someone I can see myself growing old with. I know we don't really love each other yet, but I think it'll happen."

Sarah Jane felt her stomach fall. She was in love with him. Having him say he didn't love her—well, it hurt! She wanted him to love her. Even if he only did it in her imagination.

"I think it'll come as well. Edna Petunia keeps telling me that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, and I'll be feeding you nonstop!"

"And I will appreciate that. I've eaten your cooking, and trust me, the thing I've missed most since coming to town is good home cooking. Edna Petunia has taught you well."

"Actually, I was a good cook before we ever came here. That was my job back in New York. I cooked most of the meals."

He frowned at that. "I thought people took care of orphans. It never occurred to me that you cooked your own meals."

"It's not like there are people crawling out of the woodwork to volunteer in orphanages. The chores are divided among the children as much as possible. We were on the outskirts of town, so we had a farm. The boys milked the cows and they grew the vegetables, and then we girls canned them. It was a lot of work for all of us, but it was good work. We learned a lot."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Oh, I love to cook, and that was mainly what I did. Some of the others would take care of the small children. Penny did all the sewing, because she was good at that. Opal and Evelyn took care of the little ones. We all had our talents, and Mrs. Hayes was very competent at figuring out what the strengths of each child under her care were and assigning them to do just that. It may not have been an idyllic childhood where we sat around with our watercolors painting landscapes, but we learned the life skills we needed to survive."

"What about little ones? Like Chrissy? Would she have been made to work?"

Sarah Jane nodded. "Oh, sure. Nothing major, but she'd have helped in the kitchen or been assigned to do some of the weeding. There were a lot of things she could have done."

"And in our home? Will you have her work?" Micah hated the idea of the little girl having to do anything but comb her baby doll's hair.

"Yes, of course, she'll have chores. I'll need to train her so she'll be a good wife and mother." Sarah Jane had never heard of a mother who didn't teach her daughters that way.

"Well, what if she doesn't like it?"

She looked at him. "Micah? I don't think she's been abused in any way. She's too sweet-natured for that. Yes, she's had a difficult life, but no more difficult than any other orphan. Learning to do chores and work hard is part of growing up."

He sighed. "I suppose it is."

"Did you have no chores growing up?"

He laughed. "My life was a constant string of chores. I grew up on a ranch. I was always helping with the branding, the roundup, mending fences."

"Do you think your parents did something wrong, raising you that way? To work hard?"

"Well, no, but I wasn't an orphan."

"We aren't going to mollycoddle her and turn her into a brat, Micah. We need to start out as we intend to go forward. I remember Mrs. Hayes being very strict with some new children who came, and Opal got angry with her. She thought it was too much. Mrs. Hayes told her that she could start out strict and soften up as she went along, but she couldn't start out soft and get stricter. It just doesn't work that way."

"And you think Mrs. Hayes knows everything about child-rearing?"

Sarah Jane shrugged. "I don't think anyone but God knows everything about child-rearing. I do think she knows a great deal more than I do, and I believe she has done a good job raising the children she's raised."

"That makes sense. I just hate the idea of making her work at all at her age."

"At her age, she'll have to make her own bed and sweep the floor. I'll start teaching her to cook, but she won't be touching anything hot or be allowed to work with knives. Trust me. She's not going to do anything that's beyond her abilities, and I would never ask her to."

"I trust you. All right. I agree with that." He looked at her as if a thought just occurred to him. "Are you going to continue volunteering at the orphanage?"

"Probably for a little while. At least half days. I can't imagine leaving the matron to do everything she has to do with no help. There just aren't enough volunteers in town."

"Will you take Chrissy with you?"

"Of course. She's much too little for me to leave her at home alone. She'll have other children to play with as well. Once she starts school in the fall, it'll be easier."

Micah nodded. "I'm glad you're here to help me with her. I would probably spoil her so badly, no one would ever want to be around her."

"It's an easy thing to do. Especially with a child you so obviously adore. You want what's best for her, and it almost seems counter-intuitive to have her work. It's exactly what she needs, though."

"I know that in my head. My heart says differently." He smiled

down at Chrissy, who was still sleeping soundly. "She must have had a hard night."

"We both did. She was so excited about us getting married today that she was bouncing around last night. Today was like Christmas for her."

"Christmas. I almost forgot about Christmas. It's also her birthday, and it's in two weeks. What are we going to do for it?"

Sarah Jane grinned. "I was planning on making her some new clothes. The ones she has are in terrible condition. I'll also make her doll some clothes to match hers. She'll love that."

"You think? She doesn't need anything else?"

"She'd have gotten a whole lot less at the orphanage. I'm sure she'll feel like she's someone special with all that." She smiled. "Besides, all she really wanted was for someone to make her their own for Christmas. We're doing that."

"That's very true. She did say that's all she wanted."

"Trust me. It's all any orphan wants for Christmas. We all talked about Christmas morning and how someone would come along and take us home with them. Someone would look over all of the orphans and choose just us. It never happened, but we all dreamed about it. Constantly."

"Well, I hope she's happy. I plan on being a strict father, but a loving one."

"I don't think you can be loving without being strict. People who are too lax with their children are doing them a disservice."

"I agree." He squeezed the hand he still held tightly. "See? We're already agreeing on how to be good parents together."

Less than twenty minutes later, they reached a small church on the outskirts of town with a parsonage right next to it. He jumped down. "Let me run up. One of my friends from seminary is assigned to this church."

Sarah Jane nodded with a yawn. She was more tired than she'd realized. Chrissy had been so happy and giggly during the night that she really had barely slept.

Chrissy woke up and looked around. "Are we married now?"

Sarah Jane smiled at the child's words. "Your new daddy is talking to the pastor of the church. After he comes back, we'll get married."

"Oh, good." Chrissy sat up and rested her cheek on Sarah Jane's shoulder. "I'm glad I didn't miss it."

"We're not going to let you miss it! This wedding is what will make us all a family."

"When my mama got married, she left me at the orphanage. She said her new husband didn't like kids, so I couldn't live with her

anymore."

Sarah Jane was saddened by the little girl's words, but not at all surprised. She'd heard the same kind of story many times. "Well, we're not going to leave you anywhere, because we both love you."

"He's coming back!" Chrissy told her, watching as Micah walked toward the buggy.

"He's happy to marry us. His wife said you could take a few minutes to wash your face if you needed, and she'll keep an eye on Chrissy during the ceremony." He walked around to her side of the buggy and lifted Chrissy down, before holding out his hand to help Sarah Jane to the ground.

Sarah Jane smiled, resting her hand in the crook of his arm. They walked up to the house together.

A young woman not much older than Sarah Jane opened the door. She had red hair and dancing green eyes. "You must be Sarah Jane. Welcome!"

"Thank you. This is Chrissy." Sarah Jane smiled as the girl nodded regally.

"I'm Jill, Thomas's wife."

"Thomas went to seminary with Micah?"

Jill nodded. "They were roommates there. I've met Micah before. It's nice to see him marrying. And getting a little girl as well. He's going to be the best father!"

Chrissy nodded again. "That's why I picked him. He was dressed like Santa, but I knew he was just a regular man under the beard."

Jill laughed. "Now that's a story I'll need to hear while you get ready." She took Sarah Jane's arm and tugged her toward one of the back rooms.

"Chrissy, stay with Daddy." Sarah Jane went with her new friend to get ready for the wedding.

Chrissy nodded, walking over and slipping her small hand into Micah's. Micah's eyes met Sarah's Jane's. "I've got her. You go on."

Sarah Jane shrugged off her coat off and used the pitcher and bowl Jill provided. It seemed like she was going back in time. Edna Petunia's house had a real bathroom, and she'd gotten used to it.

"So, tell me how you met Micah!"

She was in what looked to be a spare room. She briskly washed her hands. "He's the pastor at the church in my town. I had never even spoken to him until last Sunday, when I asked him to play Santa Claus for the party at the orphanage. I volunteer there."

"Oh, that's a great way to meet!"

"I thought so. My family had him over for Sunday dinner, and we got to know one another a bit better. We decided to start courting, but then Chrissy moved into the orphanage, and she changed everything."

"How did she do that?" Jill asked, her face perplexed.

"When she arrived, she told me her story, and something about it just tugged at my heartstrings. I knew I had to have her. I still lived at home and had no job, so there's no way I could do it on my own."

"She told the story to Micah, and he reacted the same way. So we're marrying, so we can adopt her. He said love will follow."

Jill frowned. "You're not in love with him?"

"I didn't say that, did I?" Sarah Jane had no intention of talking about her real feelings with someone she'd just met a few minutes before, whether she felt like a friend or not.

"He's awfully lovable. Why, if I didn't have Thomas, I think I'd fall for Micah in a trice."

"He's a good man. I'm glad he chose me."

"Well, let's get out there and make this wedding happen then, shall we?" Jill led the way back into the parlor, where they'd left the two men with Chrissy.

Micah held out his free hand for her as she entered the room. "Sarah Jane, this is one of my school friends, Thomas. He's going to marry us."

"It's nice to meet you, Thomas."

"So, are you ready to marry this scalawag?" Thomas asked.

Sarah Jane smiled, her eyes cutting over to Micah. "I think I am. I'm not making a mistake, am I?"

Thomas laughed. "I wouldn't say so. I mean, he has redeeming qualities that make up for his nonsensical ways."

Chrissy moved in front of Micah, looking up at Thomas. "My daddy is going to marry my mama, and you're not going to stop them. So do it!"

Everyone laughed at that. Thomas leaned close to Sarah Jane and Micah to whisper, "If she had a gun, I'm sure she would have pulled it by now."

"No doubt," Micah said, his hand atop Chrissy's shoulder. "It's all right. We're getting married right now."

Chrissy moved to stand beside Sarah Jane, back to her normal well-behaved self. Ten minutes later, Thomas pronounced them man and wife, and Micah kissed Sarah Jane softly.

"What about me?" Chrissy demanded as soon as the kiss broke apart.

Micah laughed, picking her up in his arms and kissing her cheek with a loud smacking sound. Sarah Jane followed suit, kissing her other cheek. "There, now we're all a family."

Chrissy frowned. "He said you were married, but he didn't say we were a family. He has to say it!"

Thomas quickly said, "And you're all a family now and forever."

Chrissy sighed happily, scrunching up her little face. "Now and forever. That sounds nice."

Sarah Jane hugged Chrissy, who was still held in Micah's arms. "I like the sound of it too."

Micah turned to Thomas, shaking his hand. "Thank you for marrying us. I really appreciate it."

Sarah Jane watched them and was surprised at how different Micah carried himself when he was talking to his friend than he did when he was talking to her. She decided not to worry about it as they walked outside. Maybe all men were different with their friends than they were with their wives.

Chapter Six

Chrissy pulled away from Sarah Jane as soon as they got to the front yard, and Sarah Jane kept walking to the buggy, assuming Chrissy was right behind her. It wasn't until Micah helped her into the buggy, and she held her arms out for the girl that she realized she was missing. "Where's Chrissy?" she asked, not letting panic enter her voice.

Micah looked around. "I thought she was with you."

"She was! She's gone now!" She didn't wait for him to help her down, but instead all but leaped from the buggy, standing beside it and looking in every direction for the little girl. "I have no idea where she went!"

Micah gave her a look she could only interpret as annoyance before running up to the house. She heard him say, "Between the house and the buggy we managed to lose Chrissy. We need help looking!"

Thomas called for Jill, and the two of them were outside within moments, both wearing coats and ready to look.

Micah and Sarah Jane went one way, calling for the girl as they walked, while Thomas and Jill went the other. "Chrissy! Where are you?" Sarah Jane called, feeling the panic spread through her body.

"Chrissy!" Micah called, wondering how they could have lost her in such a short amount of time. "Chrissy!"

They were a good way from the parsonage, at least a half mile, when they heard a response to their calls. It was faint, but it was there. "I'm here!"

Sarah Jane gathered her skirts in her hands and rushed in the direction of the voice. She found Chrissy kneeling on the ground beside a mother dog, with four puppies climbing all over her. "Chrissy, you can't just wander off that way! We were worried sick!"

"But Mama, I saw this dog, and she seemed to be all alone. I want to keep a puppy. May I?"

Sarah Jane looked over her shoulder at Micah who had run after her.

Micah frowned. "No, Chrissy. Those puppies look too young to leave their mama. And your mother is right. You can't just wander off. Even if there are puppies."

Chrissy looked down, mumbling under her breath, as if she was upset they had scolded her for chasing the dog. "I just want a puppy."

"And the answer is no." Sarah Jane got to her feet. "Come on back to the buggy now."

Chrissy stood up obediently, but her face was full of defiance.

"Why can't I have a puppy? I couldn't have one when I lived in the orphanage because there was no extra food for a dog. Is there no extra food at our new house?"

Micah took a deep breath. He knew he had to remain firm. Suddenly, the advice about starting strict and letting up later made sense to him. "Now isn't the time. I'm used to living alone. Your mama is used to living with lots of people. You're used to the orphanage. Until we're all used to living with each other, we don't need to add a dog to the mix."

Chrissy kicked a rock on the ground, her face a pout. "But I want a puppy."

"I'm not saying no forever. I'm saying no for now to those puppies. Maybe someday, we'll get you a puppy, but that day is not today." Micah looked at Sara Jane to back him up.

"Your daddy is right. We all have to get used to each other before we get a puppy."

Chrissy made it clear she was not pleased with the answer, but she didn't ask again.

Soon, they found Thomas and Jill and called off the search. "She saw a dog, and followed it. She wanted a puppy," Micah explained.

Thomas laughed. "Puppies are wonderful, but not on the day you marry!"

Moments later, they were in the buggy, headed back to Nowhere. "I brought lunch if we get hungry," Sarah Jane reminded Micah. She was a bit worried about how angry he'd seemed when they'd first realized that Chrissy was missing.

"Once we're out of town, we'll stop for lunch," he told her.

Chrissy sat silently, her arms folded over her chest. She was obviously upset she hadn't gotten her way. Sarah Jane couldn't figure out where their sweet little girl had gone. "Edna Petunia sent some wedding cake," she told him. "Chrissy helped her make it."

"She did?" Micah asked, the smile returning to his face. "I could happily eat some cake."

"We have fried chicken, baked beans, and cake. I was going to make a potato salad, but Edna Petunia told me I should go easy on myself on the day of my wedding."

"We'll do fine without potato salad. I appreciate you making chicken for us. It's going to be a long day." He glanced down at Chrissy, who was still refusing to speak.

"But at least everything we're doing today, we're doing as a family. That's what really matters," Sarah Jane said, refusing to look at the child.

"We'll be far enough out of town to stop in about five minutes. I'd rather be in the country for our picnic. Would that suit you?"

She nodded. "Yes, I'm getting really hungry. And I don't feel married."

He chuckled. "And how does being married feel?"

"I wish I knew."

Once they stopped, she pulled the quilt from the back of the buggy and spread it on the ground. When she turned to go back for the picnic basket, she saw he was already holding it. He set it on the ground for her, and she knelt on the quilt, pulling out the dishes and fixing three plates.

She glanced over at the buggy and saw that Chrissy was still sitting in it moping. "Are you going to get her?"

Micah shrugged. "Sure. But I'm doing it my way." He turned to the buggy and called out, "I'm saying the prayer in exactly one minute. Anyone who isn't sitting on the quilt goes hungry!" He sat down and smiled at Sarah Jane, who was doing her best to hide her grin.

"Works for me," she said as she poured lemonade into three glasses.

Chrissy came to the quilt and sat down with her legs crossed in front of her, her too-short, patched skirt barely covering her knees.

Sarah Jane reached out and fixed the child's skirt for her before handing her the glass of lemonade she'd just poured. "I'm glad you joined us."

Chrissy frowned, taking a sip of the lemonade.

Micah said, "Let us pray," and then he bowed his head. "Father God, we thank You for the food You've so generously provided and for bringing us together as a family. We want to do everything we can to praise You and please You. We pray this in the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen."

He reached out, grabbed a chicken leg, and took a big bite. "This is delicious. How did I ever end up with such a wonderful cook for a wife?" He looked at Chrissy. "Isn't the food good?"

Chrissy nodded. "It's very good, Mama." She said nothing else, and kept her eyes lowered, but it was enough for Sarah Jane. Chrissy was at least trying to behave, and that was what really mattered.

When they arrived back in town, it was too early to go to supper at the Sanders' house, so Sarah Jane chose to go straight to their new home. She would take stock of what was needed, and decided if she needed to go shopping the following day.

The house was small, as he'd said, but it was sturdy. It needed a good cleaning, but considering he'd lived there alone as a bachelor, she didn't think it was bad at all.

There was a kitchen with a table where he obviously took his meals. A small parlor with a sofa and two chairs, a bathroom, and two tiny bedrooms. "Which bedroom is ours?" she asked Micah.

He took her to the littler of the two rooms. "This one, unless you need the larger room."

She shook her head. "No. When we share a room, we'll want the larger of the two." Running her hand over the mattress, she smiled. "It's a good bed. We'll do just fine in here, won't we, Chrissy?"

Chrissy nodded. She'd been in better spirits since lunch, but it was still obvious that she was annoyed not to have come home with a puppy.

Sarah Jane put their things on the bed and quickly unpacked. "Do you have bedding for this room?"

He shook his head. "I don't. I don't have much extra of anything."

"I can get some from Edna Petunia. It's not a big deal." She put their things away, blushing as he stood watching as she unpacked her unmentionables. Of course, he was her husband, and he had to know she wore them. It was still embarrassing.

She went to the kitchen next with both Micah and Chrissy trailing after her. She wasn't sure why they were so concerned with her actions, but she said nothing. She dug through the shelves of his pantry, finding little. "I'm going to need to go to the store first thing in the morning."

He nodded. He showed her where he kept the household funds and gave her a budget. "I know you're used to spending whatever you want, but you'll have to be a bit more disciplined. Being a minister necessitates a shoestring budget, I'm afraid."

Sarah Jane smiled at that. "I expected nothing else. I know how to squeeze a penny until the Indian chief begs for mercy!"

"So glad to hear you won't be putting me in the poor house anytime soon." He glanced down at Chrissy with a grin. "I don't know about this one, though."

Chrissy threw her arms around his legs. "I won't make us poor, Daddy. I promise!"

He picked her up and hugged her tightly. "I know you won't. Your mama won't let you!"

Sarah Jane smiled at the picture they made. He may not love her yet, but he made it very obvious that he loved Chrissy. That was what really mattered to her. At least, that's what she told herself.

* * *

A few hours later, they were back at the Sanders' house for supper. There just wasn't enough food in the parsonage for Sarah Jane to make a nutritious meal. She would start cooking for her family in the morning. Of course, she'd have to borrow some eggs from Edna Petunia to make it possible.

When they got to the house where Sarah Jane had lived for the

past three years, Edna Petunia shooed Sarah Jane from the kitchen. "You've been traveling all day. You don't need to help with supper. I've got Katie helping."

"Katie's no help in the kitchen. Food burns if she looks at it!" Sarah Jane protested.

"True as that may be, she's singing to me while I work, and it's keeping my ears happy."

Sarah Jane shook her head, laughing. "All right. We'll go to the informal parlor. I want to have Penny help me make a few dresses for Chrissy before Christmas. Do you know if she has time?"

"For her new niece? I promise you, she has time. All the girls are excited about Chrissy joining the family."

"And you?"

Edna Petunia laughed. "I'd give up my cough syrup habit for another six just like her."

"That's saying a lot!"

"It really is. Now, go! Enjoy your time with the other girls. You won't be seeing them so often any longer."

Sarah Jane was in luck. Penny was in the informal parlor with her feet up, embroidering a pillow. "I need your help."

Penny sat up straighter. "What do you want?" She looked at Sarah Jane skeptically.

"I need to make Chrissy a few new dresses before Christmas. And a nightgown. Her clothes are in terrible shape."

"Like ours were when we first moved here?" Penny asked with a smile.

"Worse! She didn't have you patching her clothes and keeping them looking fashionable." Sarah Jane sat beside Penny on the couch. "Could you help me?"

"Absolutely. Does she have any old dresses we can use as a pattern for size?"

Sarah Jane shook her head. "I'm afraid not. None of her dresses fit her properly. There aren't any long enough. Most are too tight in the torso. We really need to measure her to be certain to make them to fit her rather than relying on old dresses for size."

"I'll run upstairs and get my tape measure. If I cut the dresses out, and pin them together where they need to be sewn, can you sew them while I'm at work?"

Sarah Jane nodded. "Make sure you make it very clear where, though. Being me, I'll sew the wrong sides together, and you'll just have to take it all apart."

"You're going to owe me two dozen cookies when I'm done with this one!"

"I can do that in my sleep." Sarah Jane smiled, glad Penny was

turning it into a trade. She wouldn't feel guilty about it then.

Penny rushed out of the room, and Sarah Jane went in search of Micah and Chrissy. She was sure the little girl had stayed with her new daddy once they arrived, because she certainly wasn't with her.

She found Micah in the formal parlor talking to Cletus. "Where's Chrissy?"

"I thought she was with you," Micah said, his voice perplexed.

"She's probably upstairs with the girls. I'll run up and check." Sarah Jane immediately started for the stairs, not particularly concerned. When she got there, no one had any idea where the little girl was.

Hurrying back down, she stopped at the formal parlor. "She's not there."

"Where did she go this time?" Micah asked, obviously exasperated.

"I wish I knew!" Sarah Jane rushed into the kitchen. "Do you have any idea where Chrissy is?"

Edna Petunia shook her head. "She might be in the stable. Thomasina just had a litter of kittens this morning."

Sarah Jane sighed, shrugging into her coat and hurrying outside. Everyone had called Thomasina "that old tom cat" until she'd had kittens a year before. They'd had to change her name then, and Thomasina had stuck. Of course, they usually still called her Tom.

"Chrissy!" Sarah Jane called as she walked toward the stable.

"In here!" Chrissy yelled. She was at the back of the stable kneeling over the cat and her kittens, patting the cat's head. "May I have a kitten, Mama?"

Sarah Jane sighed. The child had a desire for a pet that she wasn't going to have fulfilled any time soon. "No, Chrissy. We just had this conversation about a puppy a few hours ago. You can visit the kittens here."

"But I want one to live in our house with us. I'll be lonely if I don't have a kitten." Chrissy held one of the tiny kittens cradled against her chest.

"The answer's still no. Maybe in a year, but not today. It's going to be enough for all of us to get used to each other. We don't need to throw an animal into the works."

"But I *want* it." Chrissy frowned. "You're my new mama. You're supposed to get me whatever I want."

Sarah Jane shook her head, hearing someone come up behind her, but not turning to see who it was. "No, that's not a mama's job. I need to make sure you have everything you *need*, not whatever you want. And I also need to make certain you know not to speak to adults the way you've been speaking to me. It's unacceptable."

"Daddy, tell Mama I can have a kitten."

Sarah Jane closed her eyes and went through the books of the New Testament in order. She found it more productive than simply counting to ten. "I said no."

Micah shook his head at the scene before him. Their new daughter was proving to be a brat when it came to having an animal. "The answer is no. You will listen to your mother. We need to see that you can behave well for at least a year before we can have an animal in our home."

"But I *want* a kitten!" Chrissy stood up and yelled at Micah.

Micah shook his head. He wasn't sure how he felt about corporal punishment. He knew the Bible promoted it, but his parents had never spanked him, and he just wasn't sure if it was right. In his heart, he knew it was wrong when she'd only been his daughter for twenty-four hours.

"You can't speak to us that way, Chrissy," Sarah Jane said, her voice calm. "No dessert tonight." It wasn't a harsh enough punishment, but it would do to begin with. She had to make certain Chrissy knew they were her parents, and she wasn't in charge.

"You can't do that!" Chrissy yelled at Sarah Jane.

"Oh, yes, I can! And if you argue with me about it, it'll be no dessert for a week!"

Chrissy folded her arms over her chest and plopped down into the hay, right there in the stable. "I hate you!"

Sarah Jane felt her heart break a little as her eyes met Micah's. He stared back at her, shrugging as if he had no clue what to do either. "No dessert for a week. Don't make me say a month. I will if I have to," Sarah Jane told her.

Chrissy said nothing else, but continued to sit on the ground with her arms crossed over her chest. She wasn't crying, but her face was mutinous.

Micah took Sarah Jane's arm and led her away to where Chrissy couldn't hear. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Sarah Jane shrugged. "I think she needs her bottom beaten, but I can't do that when we've had her for such a short time. I'll be creative with punishments until we know a bit more about her past."

Micah nodded. "I don't feel like it's enough, but I also feel like it's too much. She should have come with an instruction manual!"

"It's hard to know what to do. We've only been parents for a day."

"I'll back up your decision. No dessert for a week. Does that mean you won't bake any cakes or cookies for me?"

Sarah Jane laughed. "You look like a little boy who climbed onto the work table for a cookie, and found the cookie jar empty."

"Well, I do have to say, one of my favorite things about you is

how well you bake. I had visions of cookies and cakes filling up the kitchen. And now I can see that won't happen."

"Why won't it?" she asked. "It wouldn't be a punishment if they weren't around. It's a punishment because they will be around, and she can't have any."

"Seems mean, but I see what you're saying. Besides, I can't complain when I'll get cookies!" He turned to Chrissy. "You need to go back in the house, Chrissy. Your new grandmother has supper almost ready."

"I don't want a grandmother."

"That's too bad, because you have one, and your punishment will be much more severe if you hurt her feelings."

Chrissy got to her feet, her eyes shooting daggers at Sarah Jane. "I'm going. I'm not happy about it, but I'm going."

Sarah Jane took a deep breath and waited until the girl had left the stable. "Today, I'll take obedience. Tomorrow, we'll start working on the spirit of obedience."

Micah shook his head. "What have we gotten ourselves into?"

She shrugged. "I'm sure I don't know. I need to read over the paperwork the orphanage has on her. See if we can find out about her history. She said she doesn't know her father, and her mother left her. Do we know who her mother was? Or why she left?"

"I can tell you why she left," Micah mumbled.

Sarah Jane laughed. "Don't be like that! You know we both still want her with everything inside us."

He sighed. "We do. I just wish she was still acting like she did the night I met her."

"Me too."

Convincing Edna Petunia that her new granddaughter wasn't allowed to have dessert was almost more than Sarah Jane could do. "Edna Petunia, she's been disobedient and disrespectful. If we let her get away with that today, imagine what she'll be like in a year. You have to allow me to carry out her punishment."

Edna Petunia looked almost as mutinous as Chrissy had just minutes before. "I don't like it."

"Of course you don't like it! You're too soft. And you love having bastard grandchildren too much."

Edna's eyes lit up. "Is she a bastard? Are you sure?"

Sarah Jane shook her head with a sigh. "No, I'm not sure, but I guess she is. I'll be looking into her history so we can figure out how best to help her."

"She's a good girl. I like her. If she can't have cake, can she at least have a peppermint stick?"

"I know where those peppermint sticks have been, and the answer

is no."

"Oh, posh. A little sweat never hurt anyone. It'll help her grow hair on the bottoms of her feet!" Edna Petunia said with a smile.

"Why would anyone want hair on the bottoms of their feet?"

"I have no idea, but it would look interesting, wouldn't it?" Edna Petunia asked. "Help me carry the food into the dining room since you just can't seem to stay out of my kitchen."

"Yes, ma'am." Sarah Jane picked up a platter of meat and a gravy boat, carrying them through to the dining room. Two of the other girls were rushing back and forth carrying things as well.

When they were all sitting around the table for the meal, Sarah Jane noticed that Chrissy had situated herself between Edna Petunia and Cletus, obviously planning to make a play for their sympathies. Sarah Jane stared at Edna Petunia until she caught the older woman's eye. "You promised."

Edna looked angry, but she nodded.

At the end of the meal, when Edna Petunia and Katie were serving cake, Chrissy asked, "May I have a piece of cake, please?"

Edna looked at Sarah Jane and shook her head sadly. "No, sweetie. You had dessert taken away for a week. You shouldn't even request it."

Chrissy said nothing else, but she crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back in her chair, obviously surprised that Edna Petunia had done what Sarah Jane wanted. She glared at Sarah Jane and Micah, who ate the cake Edna had made for their wedding.

"This is wonderful, Edna Petunia," Sarah Jane said. "Thank you for taking the time to bake us a wedding cake. It's very good."

Chrissy put her head down onto the table and stared at Cletus, watching every bite that went into the man's mouth.

Cletus smiled at the little girl, licking his lips. "Best cake I ever did eat. You know what, snickerdoodle? I'd like another piece. Chrissy didn't get one, so I'll just eat hers."

Chrissy's eyes widened with shock. Obviously, her antics had worked with other people, but they weren't working with Cletus. "You can't eat my piece!"

"Won't be good in a week. You know what, Chrissy?"

"What?" she asked, her eyes narrowed.

"I think I'll have two desserts every night for a week, just to keep everything in the world in balance." Cletus winked at Sarah Jane and Micah, showing them his support.

Micah turned a laugh into a cough when Sarah Jane elbowed him. "Don't you dare laugh," she hissed under her breath.

"Being a father is hard work!" Micah replied, keeping his face down so she wouldn't see the laughter trying to escape his lips.

"Delicious cake, Edna Petunia."

"You should see the hats I make!" Edna replied.

"Hats?" Micah asked. He felt as if he was missing something.

"I was a hat maker before I retired to start my adventure with the Sullivan girls."

"Sullivan girls?" Now he *knew* he was missing something.

"Dr. Iris Harvey was the eighth in a line of girls with flower names. Their last name was Sullivan. I made hats before I became an honorary Sullivan."

Micah swallowed the cake in his mouth, nodding as if he understood. "How did you become an honorary Sullivan?" he asked, certain even as he did he'd regret the question.

"By taking on a flower name, of course. You don't think someone in their right mind would name their daughter Edna Petunia, do you?"

Not certain how to respond to that, Micah kept his mouth shut. This time, he was the one to elbow Sarah Jane when she turned her laugh into a cough.

Chapter Seven

Chrissy was back to her sweet self by the time they reached the parsonage that evening. She talked excitedly to Micah and Sarah Jane about their new lives together as if nothing had happened.

"I'm going to be the best girl in the whole wide world!" she announced. "I'll make my bed, and help with chores, and do anything you ask of me. I'll even help cook!"

Sarah Jane and Micah looked at each other over the top of her head. Micah thought she reminded him of a book he'd read recently by Robert Lewis Stevenson called *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The child was sweet as could be one moment and a real hellion the next. He never knew who she was going to be. He sincerely hoped it was simply the way she'd been raised that made her act so erratically and not something wrong with her.

When Sarah Jane and Chrissy went to bed, they prayed together in the spare room. Chrissy's prayer helped Sarah Jane understand her a bit better.

"Please, God, help me to be a good girl. I know I can be naughty at times, but I do want to be good. And help my new mama and daddy love me always. I don't want them to stop just because I'm naughty. In Jesus's name. Amen."

Sarah Jane hugged her tightly. "We're not going to stop loving you. We'll punish you when you misbehave, but neither of us will ever stop loving you. I promise."

Chrissy had tears streaming down her face. "Everyone else did."

When Sarah Jane tried to get her to say more, the child remained silent, her eyes closed.

* * *

After breakfast on Tuesday morning, Sarah Jane set out for the orphanage, Chrissy's hand gripped tightly in hers. She knew she should talk to Mrs. Henderson about cutting back to half days. She needed to have time to focus on the cooking and cleaning she'd have to do as a new wife, and she wanted to spend as much time with Chrissy as possible.

She was worried. Chrissy woke during the night, out of breath and crying. Sarah Jane had woken with her, holding her and rocking her back and forth, but it was two hours before either of them had gotten back to sleep. Sarah Jane hoped that wasn't a regular occurrence.

When they reached the orphanage, Chrissy started crying. "Please don't give me back! I'll be good! I promise!"

"I know you will, baby. We're not giving you back! I work here every day."

"May I stay at home? Or with my new grandma? I don't want to go back!"

Sarah Jane shook her head, not understanding. "You were here for less than a week, Chrissy! Did someone mistreat you?"

"Not here," Chrissy mumbled.

"Were you mistreated at another children's home?"

Chrissy shrugged. "No."

"Then why don't you want to go back?"

"Everyone always takes me back. No one wants to keep me."

Sarah Jane didn't understand, and she knew she had to. Understanding her new daughter's fears was one of the most important things she must do. When they reached the orphanage, she talked to the matron. "I'm not going to be able to keep working more than half days. I'm so sorry."

The matron patted Sarah Jane's arm affectionately. "Truly, I'm surprised you're here at all. I thought you'd decide not to come back once you were married."

"I wouldn't do that to you. Not without some notice at least." She lowered her voice as she watched Chrissy skip away to play as if she hadn't just gotten upset. "I need to see Chrissy's records, if you don't mind. She's acting oddly."

The matron nodded. "It's an interesting read."

Sarah Jane sighed. "I was afraid of that." She followed the matron to her office.

"You sit here and read while I take care of the children. I'll go for my break after you're done, and make certain to be back here by the noon hour so you can go home and do what you need to do there."

"Thank you." Sarah Jane picked up the file and started reading.

An hour later, she closed it, rubbing her forehead. She truly wished they'd had the foresight to read it before adopting the girl, but she knew deep down she and Micah both still would have wanted her. She belonged with them.

On their way home, Sarah Jane and Chrissy stopped at the mercantile, buying the things they needed for meals for the next few days. The budget Micah had given her to spend was strict, but not so bad she couldn't make it work.

As she piled what they needed on the counter, Lewis asked, "How would you feel about earning a little money?"

Sarah Jane had never worried about finances, but she knew she would like to be able to buy something nice for Micah, and Chrissy desperately needed some clothes. Edna Petunia would always help if asked, but she didn't want to ask. She wanted to be able to do it on

her own. "Doing what?"

"Right now, it's all Ruby can do to keep up with the twins. If you could make dinner until the baby's born, and maybe for a week after, that would help us out tremendously."

Sarah Jane thought about it. The parsonage was only a few houses down from the mercantile where Ruby and her family lived and worked. "I'd be happy to cook for you all. I couldn't ask for money, though."

"You're not living with Edna Petunia any longer, Sarah Jane. You're going to find you need the money. Please accept it. I won't feel right about you helping out if I don't pay you at least a little for it."

Sara Jane finally nodded. "That would be fine, but will you pay me in goods and not with money? There's something I have my eye on for Micah for Christmas."

Lewis grinned, nodding. "I'd love to do that. Could you start tomorrow?"

Sarah Jane thought about everything she needed to do and nodded anyway. "I can start today. I remember what a hard time Ruby had last time she delivered, and she didn't have twin toddlers then."

"Thank you! The boys are going to rebel if I make one more meal. The twins don't seem to care."

Sarah Jane laughed. "Of course the twins don't care. They're still too little to know the difference."

Chrissy glared at Lewis. "We need my mama at our house. You can't have her!"

Lewis laughed. "I only need her help for a few weeks. My wife is about to have a baby."

"Oh. I don't much like babies."

Sarah Jane bit her lip. "This baby will be your cousin."

Chrissy seemed to think about that for a moment. "I guess that's all right, then."

Sarah Jane shook her head as she picked up the box of goods. "Do you want us to come over to cook?" she asked, wondering how she was going to manage if he did. It would be difficult for her to cook dinner at both homes.

Lewis shook his head. "Just cook it at home, and I'll come pick it up when I close the store at six. Will that work for you?"

"That's fine. Thanks, Lewis."

She and Chrissy walked the rest of the way home while Sarah Jane thought about what she had on hand that she could quickly turn into a meal for their family for lunch. Finally she lit on making French toast out of the stale bread on their table. That would use up the food and keep it from being wasted, but also give them a bit of a treat.

She planned to spend the afternoon baking some bread and

cleaning as well as cooking supper for her family and now Ruby's. It was going to be hard to get it all done, but if she made the same thing for both families, it would help.

Chrissy washed her hands, and Sarah Jane carefully tied one of her aprons around her before pulling her own over her dress. Together they made French toast, and had just enough time to get it onto the table when Micah arrived.

"What's for lunch?" he asked, hugging Chrissy and kissing Sarah Jane's cheek.

"We made French toast!" Chrissy announced excitedly.

"You did? I don't think I've ever had French toast," Micah said. He glanced at the table. "Looks and smells wonderful."

When Micah had left again, Sarah Jane gazed down at Chrissy. "You have two choices. You can help me with my chores this afternoon, or you can take a nap."

"I'll help!" Chrissy said enthusiastically.

Sarah Jane smiled. "I'm so relieved. I wasn't sure I could do all the work myself." She cleared the table with Chrissy following behind her. "Now we need to wash dishes. Do you want to dry them while I wash?"

Once the dishes were done, they mixed dough for several loaves of bread, and while it was rising, Sarah Jane had Chrissy wash some carrots and potatoes, which she then peeled. "We're making stew for supper."

"Beef stew?" Chrissy asked.

"Yes, beef stew. Do you like beef stew?" Sarah Jane asked. So far the child had been willing to eat everything put in front of her, so she wasn't terribly worried.

"I love it!"

Once the stew was on, Sarah Jane punched down the bread and put it in pans to rise again. While it was rising, she smiled at Chrissy. "Even though you're not allowed to have dessert, your new daddy loves dessert, and so does Ruby's family. Why don't we make two cakes?"

Chrissy frowned at the mention of her punishment, but she nodded. "I'd like that."

It was half past four before they got the bread out of the oven and had the cakes frosted. Sarah Jane was used to hard work, but she wasn't used to doing it with her sleep so badly interrupted. She also knew she needed to share what she'd found out about their new daughter with Micah that night. Hopefully, the insight she'd gleaned would help them understand the girl better.

When Micah walked into the house at half past six, the kitchen was clean, but he couldn't see that any other work had been done in

the house. He was disappointed that more cleaning hadn't been done, but Sarah Jane was a new wife. And the smells from the kitchen were heavenly.

When Sarah Jane brought out dessert, all was forgiven. He would never be able to get upset with her if she continued to cater to his sweet tooth. "I can't believe you had time to bake a cake."

"I know how much you love sweets," Sarah Jane responded.

She sat at the table with her own cake in front of her, eating small bites. She was more tired than hungry, but she wasn't about to admit that to him. Chrissy drank her milk and looked sad while they ate cake, but she didn't complain. She was taking her punishment better today.

Chrissy helped Sarah Jane with the dishes after supper before going to her room to play with her new baby doll. As soon as she'd left, Sarah Jane said to Micah, "I learned some things by reading Chrissy's file today. We have a lot to talk about after she's asleep."

Micah's eyes widened. "That bad?"

Sarah Jane shrugged. "I think we still would have chosen to adopt her if we'd known, but we'd have had a better idea what to expect. I don't want to talk about it while she's awake, though."

Micah sighed. "All right. We'll talk later."

* * *

Once Chrissy was asleep, Sarah Jane slipped out of bed and met Micah in the parlor. She was wearing just a light wrap over her nightgown, and would normally have changed entirely, but she was married to the man. Surely it was fine if he saw her in her nightgown.

Micah was working on his sermon, a stack of paper in front of him and a pencil in hand. He looked up as she came into the room, thinking that she looked beautiful with her hair in disarray.

Sarah Jane sat on the sofa beside Micah, gathering her courage to tell him what she'd read in Chrissy's file. "When I got to the orphanage with Chrissy today, she started crying, so I thought she'd been mistreated in our orphanage, or in another, but she said she hadn't. So I asked the matron to let me read her file."

"What did it say?" Micah was almost too afraid to ask.

"Well, she's been in and out of orphanages since she was small. She was born to a prostitute in Hell's Half Acre in Fort Worth. The woman had no idea who Chrissy's father was. She kept Chrissy for the first two years of her life, but it became difficult for her to keep working in her profession with a small child to care for." Sarah Jane said the words quickly because she was embarrassed to have to talk about prostitutes, even with her husband. It wasn't something a lady should know about.

"So she left her at the orphanage?"

"If only that's all she did." Sarah Jane shook her head. "She left her at the orphanage, and then a month later, realized she couldn't live without her, so she went back to get her. But two months later, she was back. The periods at the orphanage grew longer, and the time with her mother shorter, until finally, when Chrissy was four, her mother married, and her new husband made it clear he didn't want a child. She dropped her off and never returned."

"That's sad."

Sarah Jane sighed. "I know. I feel badly for her. When she had been there about four months, a nice couple took her home, but her erratic behavior had them taking her back two weeks later. Five different couples have tried to adopt her, and they all took her back to the orphanage. That's why she volunteered to come to the orphanage here. She thought there would be new people to take her home with them."

Micah frowned. "Her behavior is very inconsistent, but it sounds like her life has been crazy. If we show her the love she deserves to have, I think we can help her be the best person she can be."

"I agree. I'd have taken her even knowing everything I know now, but I'd have been more prepared. Taken more time with it to explain to her what we expect and not jumped in with both feet. I know how hard it is to be left at an orphanage by people you think are going to keep you forever."

Micah took her hand in his. "We're never going to do that to Chrissy. There's nothing she could do that would make me send her back. She's ours now, and we're going to make the most of it. But we're going to have to be very strict with her."

"Yes, we are. By being strict and always doing what we say we'll do, we'll show her that we love her." Sarah Jane sighed. "I wish I could erase every time she's been abandoned because I know how much it hurts."

"I know. It would be so much easier if we had gotten her when she was first left at the orphanage, but we can't go back in time. We can only do the best we can for her now, and that's giving her a good Christian upbringing. And loving her." He looked into Sarah Jane's eyes. "And we need her to know that we care about each other, too. I feel like we've only focused on Chrissy for days. We need to concentrate on our relationship as well."

Sarah Jane nodded, feeling shy. "We do. She's going to take a lot of energy, though."

Micah leaned down and brushed her lips with his. "She will. For the next month at least, our main interest should be on her, but I think we should also set aside an hour after she falls asleep to spend time

with each other. I want to know everything about my new wife."

"And I want to know all about my new husband." She snuggled close to his side, her head on his shoulder. "Why did you decide to become a pastor? Didn't your father want you to take over his ranch?"

"I have always had a strong love for the Lord, but I figured I'd follow in my father's footsteps. Something inside me changed when I was seventeen. We had an itinerant preacher fill in for our pastor one week, and his sermon raised the hair on my arms. It wasn't about hellfire and damnation like my normal pastor preached about. Instead, it was about God's love and forgiveness. It made me feel like I needed to help spread the message."

"How did your father react to that?" she asked.

"Oh, he wasn't happy with me. My older sister married a few months later, though, and her husband's ranch borders on my father's. They decided to merge the ranches together and build an empire. Now he's happy because he has three grandsons to carry on the family tradition. It won't be called Barton Ranch anymore, but at least it'll be his blood running it."

"I don't know how my real parents would have felt about me marrying a minister. I have few memories of them. If I close my eyes and concentrate, I can picture a woman with blond hair and beautiful green eyes. Her voice was soft and full of love. My father was a big man with brown hair, and I remember his booming laugh. That's the only thing I remember about either of them. I hate that."

He hugged her to him with the arm he'd placed around her shoulders. "What about the pastor and his wife?"

Sarah Jane shrugged. "They were always kind to me, and they worked hard to instill their love of God in me. She trained me to be a good wife and mother. Both of them were very strict." She shuddered, remembering a time she'd talked back and had been forced to spend her evening on her knees praying for forgiveness for her undisciplined tongue. "I think in my mind, I've glorified the time I spent with them. I tie my years with them to my relationship with God, and that's not right. Yes, they brought me to love God, but they took me back to the orphanage like I was nobody to them. It never bothered me before, but I see how Chrissy reacts, and I realize they weren't as good as I've built them up to be."

Micah gave a sigh. "I've worried about that. You look up to them so much, I was worried you would think it was all right to do the same thing to Chrissy as they did to you."

"I . . . I know it's not all right. I care about Chrissy a great deal. I couldn't take her back after knowing her for a week. They must have been truly uncaring people to leave me and never even write."

"I'm glad you can see that. It really bothers me that you were

treated as you were."

"It was a long time ago. I don't blame them for what happened."

"But do you blame yourself?"

She shook her head. "I don't. I realize they may not be the best parental role models I could have had, but they were good models of Christianity."

He disagreed but decided not to push it. He pressed a kiss to her forehead, not wanting to end their time together, but knowing they would have trouble getting up in the morning if they didn't go to bed soon. "If we don't sleep now, we're going to be worthless tomorrow."

Sarah Jane yawned. "I know. I've cut my hours at the orphanage to half days so I can do more at home, and maybe that will help."

"Thank you for doing that. I know it means a lot for you to spend your time there, but right now, I think Chrissy and I need you more at home. Maybe when she starts school in the fall, you will be able to increase your hours again." His eyes twinkled as they met hers. "If you don't already have a child on the way by then, of course."

She blushed. "We'll take that as it comes. For now, I'll work there every morning and here every afternoon. Would you mind if I made extra for supper every night for us to have for the noon meal the next day? That would make it easier for me as I'm trying to transition."

He chuckled. "With your cooking, I'm not about to complain if you feed me the same thing for a full week. It's better than trying to cook for myself, because I'm not very good at that."

She grinned. "I'll always try to have a special dessert to feed you as well."

"That's because you're a good wife!" He stood and put his hand down to help her to her feet, gathering her against him and kissing her softly. "Sleep sweet, my dear."

"And you." As Sarah Jane walked back to the room she shared with Chrissy, she touched her lips with her hand. Surely he was developing feelings for her if he'd called her his dear.

She fell asleep with a smile on her face, happy to know that he cared, even if just a bit.

Chapter Eight

That first full day of marriage set a pattern for the week. Sarah Jane got up early, forcing herself out of bed. Chrissy's nightmares came every night at least once, and many times twice. Sarah Jane had to fight to keep her eyes open throughout the day, but there was so much work to be done, she had to keep going.

Micah visited the sick every morning, but was home by noon for lunch with Sarah Jane and Chrissy before he went to the church for the afternoon. After lunch, Sarah Jane would cook for her family as well as Ruby's, and do as much of the housework as she could without dropping from sheer exhaustion. She was able to keep up with the laundry, cook, and keep the kitchen clean, but could do little else. She was just too tired.

She taught Chrissy to make the beds, and the little girl was eager to help. She made both beds after lunch every day, and she helped with the dishes and cooking as best she could.

On Saturday night, after Chrissy had gone to sleep, Sarah Jane sneaked back out to the parlor to see Micah. She'd sensed he was angry about something, but she couldn't imagine what it could be.

Micah had his notes spread out around him, and he moved some papers so she could settle close beside him. "How was your day?" he asked.

Sarah Jane stifled a yawn. She loved her time with him in the evenings after Chrissy was asleep, but it was getting more and more difficult to stay awake. "Busy." She yawned again, covering her mouth with her hand. "Saturdays are always crazy at the orphanage because the older children are home from school." She was starting to wish she had someone to take her place there so she wouldn't feel guilty about stopping for a while.

"It might be time for you to stop volunteering," he said, voicing what she'd just been thinking. "I can tell you're having a hard time."

She nodded. "Chrissy is more demanding than I'd realized she would be. Even during our time at the orphanage, she wants all of my attention. She doesn't even like for me to change diapers or feed the younger children."

"I can understand that, given her history. Is there any way you could stop?"

"I'd have to find someone to take my place, or I would feel bad about it. There's so much need there, and I wasn't able to keep up even when I was there eight hours a day. Now that I've cut down to half days, I feel like I'm slighting the children."

"Aren't there any of your sisters who could help out? Maybe after

school?"

Sarah Jane thought about it. "Why don't I talk to some of them after church tomorrow? I know they're all busy, but a couple of them might be able to give two hours a day, which would make up for me not being there."

"I think that's a good idea. You always seem so tired, and so little gets done around here."

Sarah Jane bit her lip at his words, wanting to protest, but she couldn't. He was right. Not enough housework was being done. But she was getting up well before sunrise every morning to work on a dress for Chrissy for church, which she had just finished that morning. Then she was making breakfast, going to the orphanage for four hours, heating up lunch, cooking supper for two families, doing as much cleaning as she could, all while spending time with Chrissy. There was no time for more than she was doing.

"I'll try to do better." She hated that he'd noticed that the house wasn't as clean as it should be. As a pastor's wife, she should be an example of cleanliness, but her floors hadn't been scrubbed since they'd married, and for a long while before that, based on the looks of them. She did need to do more. But where would she find the time and energy?

Micah frowned. He could see that his words had hurt her, but she was definitely not doing the housework that should be done. In the past, he'd had different women come in and clean while he'd been at work, but now that he had a wife, they all assumed she would handle things. Maybe there was more to it than he could see.

"Are you feeling ill? Is that why you're not getting things done?"

She frowned. He didn't know about her fixing double meals, but she didn't want him to. She wanted his new Bible to be a surprise, and that's what she was working toward. The Bible he usually used looked like someone had run it over with a train multiple times. It was worn out.

"No, I'm fine. I'm just not used to being a wife and mother. I'll get better. I promise."

"I don't want you to think I'm angry about it, because I'm not, but I do think more needs to be done." He hated feeling like he was scolding her. They hadn't even been married a week, and he knew she'd taken on a great deal of responsibility for someone so young. He also knew she was capable of getting everything done. "Do you need me to help you manage your time better?"

Sarah Jane blinked. He'd gone too far, in her opinion. "I can manage my time just fine, thank you very much. Since you can only find fault in me tonight, I think I'll go back to bed. Good night."

She went to bed without kissing him for the first time in their

marriage because she wanted to scream at him instead, but she knew that wasn't the answer either.

While she lay in bed, she made a plan for how she could do more. She'd just get up an extra hour earlier. It wouldn't hurt her. How much sleep did a person really need?

* * *

Sarah Jane rose at four on Sunday morning, instead of her usual five. She worked for an hour on a new dress for Chrissy for Christmas, which was only a week away, and then went into the kitchen. She scrubbed the kitchen from floor to ceiling before she made breakfast for her family.

When Micah walked into the kitchen, he wasn't certain what he'd find. Sarah Jane had never been angry with him before, so he didn't really know what to expect at all. He found a smile on her face and breakfast on the table. "That looks delicious," he said, walking to her and kissing her cheek.

"Sit down. I'll fix you a plate."

He looked around the kitchen while she piled eggs and sausage on his plate. It was spotless. She'd obviously taken his words to heart and gotten up early to clean. He was pleased that she was making more of an effort to keep the house up.

"The kitchen looks wonderful."

"Thank you." Sarah Jane was surprised by how thrilled she was at his praise. She would continue to get up earlier.

Chrissy had a good night, and had only woken once and cried for an hour, which was much better than most nights had been. While Sarah Jane hugged her and promised they wouldn't leave her, she'd thought about how she could use her time more wisely and accomplish everything that needed to be done. She was convinced she could accomplish it all—it just meant a little more effort on her part.

"I'll get Chrissy. She wanted an extra few minutes in bed this morning."

She was back a moment later, the little girl in her arms.

"You shouldn't carry her. She's too heavy." Micah was startled to see his tiny wife carrying around a girl as big as Chrissy. He knew she'd held her on her lap, but lifting her was surely too much.

"It's fine. She's tired and didn't want to come to breakfast." Sarah Jane set Chrissy in a chair, still dressed in her nightgown. She fixed a plate for the child before sitting down beside her. "Will we eat lunch here today?"

Micah nodded. "I thought I'd not accept any more Sunday lunch invitations until after Christmas. That way, we can spend a little more time together as a family on our only day off."

Sarah Jane nodded, fixing her own plate. She had enough saved from last night's supper that she could easily feed them lunch.

After church, she talked to Dorothy and Hattie, two of the other orphans who had been adopted by Edna Petunia. "I have a favor to ask of you."

Hattie frowned. "I hate conversations that start that way."

"So do I," Sarah Jane exclaimed, making the other two laugh. "It's too much for me to keep working at the orphanage. I tried just going half days, but it's still too much. Chrissy is taking a lot more energy than I thought she would, and she doesn't sleep through the night, so I'm getting very little sleep. Could you each give two hours to the orphanage after school so the matron can get a break?"

The girls looked at each other. Hattie was the first to agree. "I will. I love the children, and it will give me something to do. You need to take care of your family."

Sarah Jane smiled, relieved. "Thank you! I appreciate it."

"I will too," Dorothy agreed. "We're fortunate enough to have been adopted by Edna Petunia and Cletus. We need to help others the way we've been helped."

"Oh, thank you both!"

"Is it okay if we start right after Christmas?" Dorothy asked. "We both have a lot to do to finish getting our gifts ready for everyone."

Sarah Jane nodded. She didn't want them to wait, but she was fortunate they were willing to help at all. "Of course, that's fine. I can handle it until then."

As they walked home, Micah asked if she'd found anyone to take her place, and she explained. "They won't be able to do it until after Christmas, though, so I'll just get up earlier. It won't be a problem."

Micah nodded. It wouldn't hurt her to get a little less sleep. It wasn't ideal, but he'd done it for years while he was at seminary. "I'm glad you've found a solution."

When they arrived home, she immediately got lunch ready while she began cooking supper. Micah played with Chrissy at the table, commenting, "That's a lot of food. Why are you cooking so much? Are we having someone over?"

Sarah Jane shrugged. "I'm helping out Ruby's family for a bit," she said, omitting the fact that she was doing it in exchange for his Christmas present. "The twins are still small enough that it's too much for her to care for them and cook in her condition."

"When is her baby due?"

"Three weeks." At least, she thought it was three weeks. Her lack of sleep over the past six days was starting to catch up with her, and she felt like her brain was a bit foggy. "Not much longer."

She put two roasts in the oven, one large and one small. She'd

peel the mountain of potatoes necessary to feed both families later. Pulling the leftover potato and ham casserole out of the oven, she put it on the table she'd already set. She'd have to make bread to go with supper after lunch dishes were done.

She poured water for all of them before slipping into her chair and bowing her head while Micah prayed for them.

As soon as they were finished eating, Sarah Jane was on her feet, clearing the table and washing dishes. The sheets needed to be washed, and it would be easier while Micah was home to entertain Chrissy.

Micah sat and talked to his new daughter, recounting to her some of his favorite Bible stories. She knew some, like the story of Noah and Adam and Eve, but she'd never heard the story of Joseph's coat of many colors. She sat on his knee, listening with wide eyes while he told the story of Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt.

She fell asleep while he was telling about Joseph interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, so he left her on the sofa and went in search of Sarah Jane. He was annoyed that she hadn't come in to enjoy story time with Chrissy.

He found her in the kitchen elbows deep in flour as she kneaded bread on the table. "You should have joined us."

"I have too much to do. We're out of bread, and I need to make some for Ruby's family as well. I have the sheets on the line, so we'll have clean bedding tonight."

He gaped at her. "It's the Lord's day. Why are you working so hard?"

Sarah Jane blinked at him. When did he think she had time to do it otherwise? "I don't really have a choice until the girls take over from me at the orphanage. I need to work when I can." Really, the only opportunity she had to sit all day was when they were together in the evenings, but she didn't tell him that. Surely he knew how much work went into keeping a house and cooking for two families. Did he think she was lazing her days away?

He shook his head. "You've taken on too much. You need to stop cooking for Ruby's family."

She sighed. "I'm not going to let my sister's family go hungry when I'm perfectly capable of cooking for them. Why don't you go tell Chrissy some more stories?" She didn't want to explain herself. At that moment, she didn't even want to look at him. She just wanted to get her work done so she could sit down and rest.

"She's sleeping."

Sarah Jane's eyes widened. The one time she'd allowed Chrissy to sleep during the day, she'd kept Sarah Jane up half the night crying. "Please go wake her. She can't take naps." She hadn't talked to Micah

about Chrissy's nightmares, because she didn't want him to worry the girl was too much work for her.

Micah stared in shock at his wife. "Why would I wake a sleeping child? She needs her rest."

She'd been raised to always obey her husband, but Sarah Jane found she couldn't obey that. Chrissy's sleep schedule would be messed up for days if she allowed her to take a long nap. She sprinkled flour over the dough and then draped a cloth over it to let it rise before going to the sink to wash her hands.

Hurrying into the parlor, she sat beside Chrissy on the sofa, gently shaking her awake. "Wake up, Chrissy. You won't sleep tonight if you sleep now."

"I'm tired," Chrissy said, rolling over and facing the back of the sofa.

Sarah Jane felt panic overwhelm her. She'd cut her sleep down to five hours a night as it was, and Chrissy would keep her up for at least an hour of that. She didn't think she could go on less than four hours. It just wasn't possible for her to function.

"Chrissy, get up." Sarah Jane moved the little girl's feet to the floor and took her arm, pulling her to her feet. "Let's go for a walk, Chrissy. I need you to help me see if the sheets are dry." She put her arm around Chrissy's waist, helping her stay upright, and guided her outside to the clothesline. "Help me feel to see if the sheets are dry."

Chrissy reached out and touched the sheets. "They're still wet, Mama."

"Oh, we must not have let them dry long enough." Sarah Jane walked down to the street with the girl, trying to keep her on her feet as long as necessary for her to be fully awake. "Did you like Daddy's sermon today?"

"Oh, yes. He sounds so smart when he preaches, doesn't he?"

Sarah Jane breathed a sigh of relief, knowing she'd accomplished what she set out to do. "I just finished making dough for bread. Would you like to help me pinch some off for dinner rolls?"

"I want to hear the rest of the story about Joseph and Pharaoh."

Sarah Jane turned and saw Micah staring at her with anger in his eyes. "Go ask Daddy, then. I need to finish making the dinner rolls."

Micah glared at her as he took Chrissy's hand and walked back into the house. Sarah Jane knew she'd have some explaining to do, but couldn't the man just know that she wouldn't do anything to hurt their little girl? Didn't he understand that she cared too much?

It was after supper that night, when Chrissy was in bed, that Micah finally brought up what she'd done. "Do you want to explain to me why our daughter isn't allowed to nap?"

Sarah Jane sighed. "She wakes up with nightmares every night. I

have to hold her and tell her we won't leave her until she stops crying and goes back to sleep." She sank down onto the sofa beside Micah. "The one time I did let her nap, she kept me up for hours. Keeping her awake during the day is the only way I know of to ensure I get any sleep at all."

Micah frowned at that. "Why didn't you tell me she was waking during the night? I would have helped you with her."

"I didn't want to worry you. You have a lot of responsibilities already. To me, this is all a part of being a newly adopted orphan. I remember waking up in the middle of the night when the couple I lived with first gave me back to the orphanage in Orlan. It was awful, and there was no one there to comfort me. Ruby and Opal sometimes took turns, when they noticed. Mostly, I just cried into my pillow. I don't want her to have to do that."

He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "So you're getting a lot less sleep than I realized. Could you leave her at the orphanage and nap for an hour or two in the afternoons?"

"There's no time. It's fine. I'll only be working at the orphanage for another week or so, and then I'll have more time. Maybe I can work something out then." She shrugged. "I can manage, but she can't take naps."

"Why don't you wake me up the next time she does it? Let me take a turn."

"It won't help. I'm already awake. No use for both of us to be up." She yawned. "But if you don't mind, I think I'm going to go to bed now. I have a lot to do tomorrow."

Micah watched as she left the room to go to the bed she shared with Chrissy. He'd misjudged her horribly. He hoped he could find a way to apologize.

* * *

Micah spent the entire day Monday trying to think of a way he could apologize properly for assuming Sarah Jane wasn't working hard. He knew her better than that. He'd watched her for a while before he'd shown his interest, and he knew she was a very hard worker. What had come over him to speak to her that way?

He was working on his sermon when he ran across a scripture that gave him an idea. He would have to talk to Penny, but he was certain between the two of them, they could pull it off.

He would let Sarah Jane know that not only did he appreciate her, he valued her as a man should value his wife. Soon, he hoped, they could make their marriage real in every way. For now, she needed help with their daughter, though. If only he could find a way to make her let him help.

Sarah Jane had never been a coffee drinker, but she'd heard from many that it helped them have energy. She began drinking it as soon as she woke in the mornings and continued until right before supper when Micah got home. She didn't want him to realize that she was needing an aid to stay awake. Surely he'd think even less of her if he found out. She hated that she was disappointing him. She had to find a way to make him realize she was willing to work hard and do anything she needed for her family.

Saturday was Christmas, and Sarah Jane was up as early as usual. She had finished hemming Chrissy's new dress the night before, sewing frantically during her time with Micah. He'd said nothing other than to compliment her on the pretty dress.

She had breakfast ready and everything in the kitchen cleaned before the other two even came into the kitchen. Chrissy's birthday cake was baked and sitting on the work table, covered with the chocolate frosting Chrissy had asked for. They would have a big family celebration at the Sanders' house later, but they would have a family lunch at home after church services.

Sarah Jane yawned widely as Chrissy rushed into the kitchen, squealing. "It's my birthday, Mama! And it's Christmas! I share a birthday with Jesus."

"Yes, you do! I made pancakes for breakfast because I know they're your favorite."

Chrissy jumped onto her chair, and Sarah Jane brought her a plate of pancakes, all cut up with syrup smothering them, just like she liked.

Micah came in, brushed a kiss on Sarah Jane's lips, and said, "Well, there's my birthday girl! My, she looks older than seven, doesn't she?"

"Oh, much older. Why, she looks eight, even! Where did this beautiful young lady come from, and where is our little girl?"

Chrissy giggled. "I'm right here!"

Micah shook his head. "No! You can't be our Christmas Carol! She's only six."

"I'm seven today, Daddy!" Chrissy smiled at him as he sat down across from her, obviously thrilled everyone was making such a big deal out of her birthday.

Sarah Jane sat down and bowed her head, waiting for Micah to pray.

"Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Son, Who You sent into the world long ago to take away our sins. Thank You for the sacrifice You made. We have our minds and hearts on Him today, the birthday He shares with our little Christmas Carol. Thank You for sending her into our lives. Her laughter and joy make this house a home. No other child could complete us the way she has. So thank You for all of our blessings and the food we are about to eat. In Christ's name. Amen."

After breakfast, they hurried into the parlor, where they'd set up a small Christmas tree right there in the house. Chrissy went on her knees and picked out a present, handing it to Micah so he could tell her who it was for. "That's for you, Chrissy."

They went through each present that way until all three of them had at least one present each in front of them, but Chrissy had four. She smiled as she looked down at her small pile of presents, her eyes lit up happily. "Four presents? Two for my birthday and two for Christmas?"

Sarah Jane shook her head. "Those are your Christmas presents. We'll give you your birthday presents later. It's not fair to get fewer presents just because you were blessed to be born on Christmas."

Sarah Jane looked down at the small package in front of her, not opening it yet. Truly, she didn't care what she received. She was more interested in what she was giving the people she loved.

Chrissy unwrapped her presents first, her new dress the first thing she opened. She held it up to her, spinning in a circle. "I'll look like a princess, Mama!"

Sarah Jane laughed. "And so you will. Just don't start pretending you are a princess and forget that we all have to do our share around here."

Chrissy grinned. "I won't!"

Her second present was a new pair of heavy socks, perfect for winter. She wasn't as excited about those, but she was still pleased. The next thing she opened was a pretty new barrette for her hair. And the last gift was a pair of shoes, just a bit too big, to go with the dress. Now she'd look presentable for church.

Micah nodded to Sarah Jane. "Your turn."

Sarah Jane bit her lip. "Oh, I'd much rather you went first. Please."

Micah looked down at the two gifts in front of him with a slight frown. "I only got you one gift."

"This is two parts to one gift," Sarah Jane explained.

He opened first the small black case. He turned it over in his hands, and then smiled. "I can carry my Bible in here."

Sarah Jane nodded. "That's exactly what I had in mind."

He carefully opened the second gift and stared in surprise at the

Bible in his hands. "How did you know I needed a new one?" He'd been planning to buy himself one as soon as he could, but he was supporting a family now, and money was dear.

"How could I not know? You dropped three pages out of your old one at church last Sunday."

He flushed, embarrassed about the incident. "It was my study Bible at school."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me. I just hope you like it."

"Of course I do!" He stared down at it for a moment. "Open your gift."

Sarah Jane carefully untied the wrapping on the gift, opening it carefully. In it was a piece of wood. She turned it over, and the words that had been painted onto it brought tears to her eyes. *She is more precious than rubies; and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. Proverbs 3:15.*

"Where did you find this? It's beautiful!" He must have gotten it immediately after they married, before he realized that she wasn't doing her share of the work. She wanted to give it back to him and tell him to find someone who deserved it.

"I told Penny what I needed, and she made it for me. I bought the supplies, of course, but there's no way I could have made it so beautiful."

The plaque had been varnished, and there were small flowers painted in each corner. Even Sarah Jane hadn't realized Penny was so talented.

"Thank you." She laid it down on her lap, fighting the tears. She had no words to express how badly she felt that she'd let him down.

Chapter Nine

All through the church service, as Micah talked about the Christmas story, he worried that he'd done something that had upset Sarah Jane. He thought she'd accept the apology the way it was meant, but maybe she needed words to go with it. Maybe she was one of those women who needed to have everything spelled out for them. It was difficult for him, but he would apologize, and make certain she knew that he valued her.

Sarah Jane paid careful attention to the sermon, doing her best to help Chrissy pay attention as well. The little girl was so excited about her birthday, and the big party she'd been promised at Edna Petunia's house later, she couldn't sit still for anything.

After the Christmas service, they went home to have their lunch, and give Chrissy her birthday gifts. After lunch they had their dessert.

"Do I get two cakes?" Chrissy asked.

"Why do you need two?" Sarah Jane asked, confused. Why did she think she'd get two?

"Well, we're having one now, but Grandma will surely make me a cake, won't she?"

Sarah Jane laughed at that. "I hadn't thought of it, but I'd be surprised if she didn't make you one. You're right. Are you excited to go over there for your birthday party?" It wasn't truly a big gathering, because it was only family, but with a family as big as Sarah Jane's, it would feel like a celebration.

"Oh, yes. I can't wait. Do you think I'll get more presents there?"

"You'll just have to wait and see, won't you? You know you can't ask for presents, though, right? If people want to give them to you, they'll do it without you asking."

"Yes'm. I know."

Micah then brought in the gift he'd made for Chrissy's birthday. It was a small cradle for the baby doll she'd gotten at the orphanage Christmas party.

When Chrissy saw it, she gasped with delight, running to get her doll, whom she'd named Sally.

Sally fit perfectly in the cradle, and Chrissy smiled, talking to her softly as she tucked her in. "I'll be right here with you, so if you get scared during the night or have nightmares, you'll have nothing to worry about. I love you, Sally."

Sarah Jane felt tears prick her eyes at the words. They were words for what she told Chrissy every night before they slept. "You're a good mama, Chrissy."

Chrissy looked at Sarah Jane, and all at once, she ran across the

room at her, throwing her arms around her. "You're a wonderful mama! I'm so glad you're going to keep me!"

Sarah Jane was surprised at the confidence in Chrissy's voice. For some reason, she seemed to know all of a sudden she wouldn't be sent back to the orphanage. She'd never been confident before.

"We love you. Of course we're keeping you."

"I know." Chrissy smiled up at Sarah Jane.

"How do you know?"

"You wouldn't have made me special things if you weren't going to keep me. You might have made me clothes to wear so I wouldn't embarrass you, but you wouldn't have made anything for Sally. So you're keeping me."

Sarah Jane smiled at the wisdom in the girl's words. "We certainly are."

Micah grinned as he watched the two of them, happy to see that Chrissy seemed to realize she really did have a permanent place with them. "Are you ready to go to your grandma's house now?"

Chrissy nodded. "Can I take Sally and her cradle?"

"Of course you can." Sarah Jane put her arm around the girl's shoulders as they walked toward the buggy, Sally held in Chrissy's arms.

Micah picked up the cradle and followed them out to the buggy. He'd already hitched the team for them, and he helped his ladies up. The whole way to the Sanders' house, Chrissy chattered on and on about how wonderful her birthday and Christmas had been.

Cletus was waiting outside for them when they arrived, and he lifted Chrissy down, carrying her into the house. Sarah Jane followed closely behind them, grinning as she heard Cletus call out in his most formal voice, "Hear ye, hear ye, the birthday princess has arrived!"

The older couple had made a big deal out of celebrating each of the girls' birthdays since their arrival in Texas, so Sarah Jane had known they'd do something special for the little girl as well. Edna Petunia called out from the kitchen, "Take her to the informal parlor, and we'll have presents, and then we'll have cake!"

Chrissy was squirming so much, Cletus almost dropped her. "Presents? I thought we were just having cake here," Chrissy said.

"Oh, we couldn't let such a special birthday go by without giving you presents!" Cletus told her.

All of Sarah Jane's "sisters" were waiting in the parlor, including Opal and Ruby. Opal had her sons on her lap, and Ruby sat, exhausted, on a sofa with the twins playing at her feet.

"Where's Florence?" Sarah Jane asked, referring to Opal's stepdaughter.

"She wasn't feeling well, so she stayed home. I think she really

just wanted some quiet time without the boys getting into everything."

Sarah Jane grinned. "Do you blame her?"

"Not one bit." Opal yawned, turning her attention to Chrissy.

Chrissy was led to a dining-room chair that had been placed in the middle of the room and had been decorated with bright strips of cloth. "The birthday chair!" Evelyn announced.

Sarah Jane felt tears prick her eyes as she looked at the sweet child. Chrissy was overwhelmed by the love being poured out onto her, and she was beaming from ear to ear. Why, her face looked as if it would break if she tried to smile any bigger.

Each of Sarah Jane's sisters, in order of age, took Chrissy a gift. They had been doing things in order of their age for years, so it was automatic for them to continue on that way.

First Ruby had Robert, her eldest son, take a small brightly wrapped package to Chrissy. Chrissy looked at Sarah Jane for permission to open it.

"Of course you may open each gift as it's brought to you, Chrissy," Sarah Jane told her, smiling at Micah, who was gripping her hand. She knew this was a big moment for her new daughter.

Chrissy carefully untied the string and found a tiny quilt made for a doll. "Oh, thank you!" she said. "This will keep Sally warm at night!"

Opal brought her gift to Chrissy next, a pair of mittens and a matching scarf.

Evelyn and Gertrude were next. They had made matching nightgowns for Chrissy and Sally. When Chrissy opened the gifts, she squealed with excitement. "Now my baby can look just like her mama! I'm her mama," she explained patiently.

Everyone laughed at her excitement. All of the girls remembered what it was like to receive some cast-off clothes for Christmas and their birthdays and nothing more, so they were thrilled to be able to see the girl receive gifts that she would enjoy.

Betsy and Hope were next. Betsy gave her a small hand mirror, and Hope had made some pretty hair bows for her and for Sally.

Penelope outdid everyone with her gift, as usual. She had made a beautiful dress for Chrissy, and then she'd pulled out a matching dress for Sally. When everyone had finished fussing over the dresses, she pulled out one more dress for Sarah Jane.

Sarah Jane felt tears pop into her eyes as she took the dress. "Now I can look just like my daughter for church tomorrow."

"I can't wait! I want to look like my mama!"

As she watched Chrissy open the rest of her presents, Sarah Jane realized how much she loved the girl. Chrissy showed impeccable manners as she thanked each person who gave her a gift.

When it came time for Edna Petunia's gift, Sarah Jane was almost

afraid. The old woman was always offering the girls nips from her flask, so one never knew what was going to come from the old woman's mouth.

"My gift is for you, Chrissy, but it's also for your parents."

Chrissy watched the older woman, her hands folded in her lap and her gifts spread around her. She had obviously never been given so many gifts in one day and was overwhelmed by the whole experience. "It is?"

Edna Petunia nodded, her old face lit up with a smile. "I'm going to keep you for two nights so your parents can have a bit of time alone together. As soon as the three of you are ready."

Sarah Jane looked at Micah and blushed. She knew it wasn't time yet, but soon, it probably would be. She had to get Chrissy over her nightmares first.

Chrissy clapped. "I'd love to stay with you and all of my aunts!"

Edna smiled. "It'll be like having a giant party that lasts all night."

While Edna Petunia was putting the birthday cake on the table to get ready to serve it, Micah pulled Sarah Jane aside. "Do you think she's ready to spend a night here with them?"

Sarah Jane frowned, shaking her head. "Not yet. Maybe in a few weeks. She's still waking with nightmares every night. I can't ask anyone else to deal with that."

He sighed. "I would like some time alone with you, but Chrissy needs to come first."

"Yes, she does. Maybe in a week or two." Sarah Jane rested her hand on his chest and stood on tiptoes to kiss him. "Soon."

"More kissing. Everyone in this family is always kissing," Robert complained as he walking into the dining room. "Good thing there's cake. Otherwise, I might have to throw up."

Sarah Jane rolled her eyes. "This is Ruby's oldest. He tried to convince Lewis that Ruby would leave him if he kissed her too much."

Micah's eyes were full of laughter. "Obviously, he wasn't successful."

"No. And Ruby doesn't seem to mind the kissing." Sarah Jane followed the others into the dining room, and they watched as Chrissy basked in the happiness that came from being the guest of honor.

"I wish it was my birthday every day!" Chrissy said.

* * *

Monday was the first day Sarah Jane got to stay home with Chrissy. She woke early as always, but she was able to cook breakfast and take her time doing the dishes. She had extra work on her agenda, because Ruby still needed meals made, but at least she wasn't working at the orphanage any longer.

As much as she loved the children there, she knew her new daughter needed her more. She wondered some days if they would have children of their own or adopt more, but she never talked to Micah about it. For the time being, Chrissy was all she could handle.

She didn't want to say anything to anyone yet because it was too new, but Chrissy had slept through the night for two nights in a row. She was stunned and amazed. It was wonderful to sleep straight through the night and not wake up to a child crying hysterically.

When Micah came home from work that evening, she not only had supper on the table, but she had scrubbed every inch of the common rooms of the house, done all the laundry, and baked him a cake for dessert.

He stopped inside the kitchen, looking around him. "The house looks amazing. You two must have worked hard all day."

Chrissy removed the apron Katie had made her for her birthday before running to Micah and flinging herself into his arms. "We missed you while you were working, Daddy, and Mama and I worked really hard to make the house look good for you."

"You did such a good job. I thought I was in the wrong house."

Chrissy giggled. "You did? I told Mama she was making it too clean and you wouldn't like it."

"I do like it, though. I like living in a clean house. Don't you?"

"Yes, but I don't like having to put Sally into her cradle with all her clothes before you get home. Tell Mama you like to see what Sally is wearing when you come home." Sally had four outfits and a nightgown, and she wore every one of them at least three times per day.

"I think your mama is right. She needs to be in her cradle in your room when I get home. You can wake her from her nap after supper."

Chrissy sighed as if she was agreeing to something horrible. "Yes, Daddy."

Sarah Jane looked over her shoulder at Micah, laughing softly. "She wanted Sally to have her own chair at our kitchen table so she could eat with us. I told her it was Sally's nap time."

"You are a smart woman." He walked across the kitchen and kissed her softly. "Did you have a good day? You seem to be in good spirits."

"It was productive. I enjoyed not having to leave the house for a change. It was nice to stay here and get work done. Lewis brought over some food because I'm still cooking for their family, so I didn't even have to go to the mercantile to shop."

"It must have felt like a regular vacation."

She laughed. "Well, I still had Chrissy." She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "That girl is hard work!"

"I am not! Tell him how much I helped, Mama."

"She helped me with the laundry, making the beds, sweeping, doing dishes. Why, I know I wouldn't have been able to get half of my chores done without her."

Chrissy smiled happily. "I'm a good helper."

"Yes, you are." Sarah Jane touched the tip of her finger to Chrissy's nose. "And now, if you'll sit down at the table, we'll show your daddy what a good cook you are." Her eyes met Micah's. "Chrissy helped me bake the bread as well."

"Well, aren't you a wonder?" Micah walked to the table and sat down. "Do you like helping your mama?"

"Sometimes. And sometimes we do what we must."

Micah laughed. "I appreciate you sacrificing your day with Sally to help out around the house. Soon, you'll have a house of your own, and we won't know what to do without you."

"You mean when I'm grown? Not when you find somewhere else for me to live?"

Sarah Jane's eyes widened. "He means when you're grown and have a family of your own. We're keeping you forever, remember?"

"Until Daddy gives me away to my husband. Maybe I'll marry Robert."

Sarah Jane bit her lip. "I don't know. Robert's your cousin. It might not be a good idea to marry him."

Chrissy shrugged. "No matter. I'll find someone better anyway."

"I'm sure you will. Why, you'll be the prettiest girl in school. Of course, you need to remember the important rule of being pretty."

"What's that?"

"Pretty is as pretty does. It doesn't matter how pretty you are if you act ugly."

Chrissy nodded. "I promise never to act ugly."

After Chrissy was tucked into bed, Sarah Jane joined Micah in the parlor. "You look better rested than you have since we married. I'm glad you decided not to work at the orphanage."

"I may go back once Chrissy is in school, but she seems a lot more settled now that we're not going there every day."

"Good." He opened his arms, and she climbed onto the sofa beside him, her head going to rest on his shoulder.

She knew she shouldn't sit with idle hands, but she didn't want to disturb the short time they had together every night by pulling out her knitting. "How was work today?"

He sighed. "Mr. Johnson is dying. I talked to Dr. Harvey today, and she said he doesn't have much time. I worry about what will happen to Mrs. Johnson."

"I had no idea he was so ill! Can Mrs. Johnson go live with her

daughter in Wiggieville?"

"She has a daughter?"

"Yes. She's quite a distance from here, but the drive could be made in a few days. She's a lovely woman. She was here with her children last summer. She had four children and another on the way. I think she'd welcome the help her mother could give her."

"That sounds like a perfect solution. I'm glad you know the people here better than I do." Micah hadn't thought about this benefit of marrying. His new wife could help with problem solving when it was something like that. "I probably should have asked Mrs. Johnson what she thought she'd do."

"Oh, I wouldn't have. What if she had no children and nowhere to go? You did the right thing." She turned her head, looking up at him to find him watching her. "Do you think I should make her a meal or two? To help them out while she's nursing him?"

"That would be wonderful. Why didn't I think of that?"

She laughed. "Because you're a man, of course. You're worried about the long-term repercussions of him dying. I'm worried about where her next meal will come from. God made us to complement each other."

"That He did." He stroked her arm. "How long do you think it will be before Chrissy starts sleeping through the night? I'd love to be able to take Edna Petunia up on her offer to watch her sometime soon."

Sarah Jane hadn't told him about the girl yet, but she wouldn't lie to him outright. "She's slept the past two nights. I think that she's finally realized we're keeping her and not sending her back."

"That's wonderful! That must be another reason you look so well-rested."

"I haven't gotten my hopes up too high yet. If she makes it through Friday without waking up crying, maybe we can schedule her weekend with Edna for a week from Friday?"

He sighed. "I want it to be sooner, but I understand your reasoning."

She looked up at him with a smile. "Good things come to those who wait. Right?"

He leaned down to brush a kiss across her lips. "That's what I've been told. I sure hope it's true."

"Hopefully, Chrissy will continue to do well. I worry about her, but I worry just as much about leaving her with someone else. Her nightmares are difficult, and I'm not sure if she would calm down easily with someone else."

"Do you think things will be easier for you now that she's sleeping better? I noticed the house looked very good today." He didn't want to remind her that she hadn't been able to keep up before, but he needed

to know if she could do it now.

She nodded slowly. "I'm sure I can." She felt like she had really let him down, and hated that he was stuck with her. "I'm sorry I couldn't do it before."

"You did nothing wrong. It was circumstances, I know. Taking care of Chrissy, dealing with her nightmares, working at the orphanage, and then fixing meals for an extra family, all while not getting enough sleep. No one in their right mind could ask you to do more."

She rested her head against his shoulder, wanting to believe he wasn't angry, but how could he not be? She'd done nothing but let him down since they got married. At least there was no orphanage he could return her to. Edna Petunia would take her back, though.

* * *

Shortly after lunch on Tuesday, Sarah Jane had an unexpected visitor. "Dr. Harvey. Come in. Is something wrong?"

Iris Harvey stepped into the small kitchen and took a seat at the table. "There's nothing horribly wrong, but I came to ask for a favor."

"Of course! Would you care for some tea?" Iris Harvey and her family had been frequent visitors at the Sanders' house since they'd taken the girls in. Sarah Jane felt as if she was an old family friend.

"No, thank you. I don't have much time. I have several patients to check on this afternoon." Iris rubbed the back of her neck, obviously tired. She was the only doctor for miles in any direction, and her services were very much in demand.

Sarah Jane sat down across from Iris. "What kind of help do you need?"

Chrissy hurried into the kitchen and saw the doctor sitting there. She looked between the two adults and left again, Sally clutched tightly in her arms.

Iris smiled at the little girl as she ran off. "She must keep you busy."

"Busier than I imagined a child of seven would. That's for certain."

"I understand. Well, here's the situation. Ruby has started bleeding. It's still too early for the baby to come, so I've told her to rest as much as possible. She insists there's too much to do, taking care of the twins and keeping house, for her to be able to rest. I was hoping you could help her out. I'd ask Opal, but she has her hands full with Nathan and Samuel."

Sarah Jane didn't hesitate. "Of course I will. I've been cooking their suppers for a couple of weeks now, but I'll start going in and cleaning as well. I can bring the twins here so Ruby can nap every day. How much is she allowed to do?"

Iris shook her head. "I really don't want her to get out of bed except to take care of nature's call. That would help them out a great deal. It might even save that baby's life."

"I'll head over there now." Sarah Jane got to her feet, getting her wrap. She hadn't done the lunch dishes yet, but they could wait. Ruby needed her, and she was going to do what needed to be done. What else could she do? "Chrissy!"

When Chrissy hurried into the kitchen, Sarah Jane told her to get her coat. "We're going to go see Aunt Ruby and your cousins. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

"I suppose so," Chrissy said warily.

"You'll like it." Sarah Jane turned back to Dr. Iris. "Thank you for letting me know about the situation. I'll make sure things go as well as possible." She gathered what she'd need to cook supper for the two families, filling her arms. She'd cook at Ruby's house while she cleaned today. It couldn't be that difficult.

Chrissy followed along beside her new mama, Sally clutched to her chest. "Why are we going to Aunt Ruby's house?"

"Ruby is having a baby, and she's not feeling well. The doctor's afraid that if we don't help her, the baby could get hurt, so we're going over to clean and cook for them."

"Oh. That's nice of us."

Sarah Jane smiled. "Your job will be taking care of your cousins. They're very little, and they need someone to watch them. Do you think you could do that?"

"Oh, yes. I'm very good with babies. Just look at what a good mama I am to Sally!"

"Well, Jade and Crystal will need all the help you can give them." Sarah Jane went to the front of the mercantile rather than going to the door of Ruby's house. It would be simpler.

When Lewis saw her, he hurried across the store. "Thank heavens you're here. We need help!"

Sarah Jane smiled. "Dr. Harvey told me everything. Don't worry—Chrissy and I will handle it. I'd like to be home by quarter past six if you don't mind. Can you be upstairs by six?"

"No problem at all. Thank you!"

Chapter Ten

When Micah walked in the door at half past six, he was tired. Mr. Johnson had died, and Mrs. Johnson had been inconsolable. He'd spent most of the day with her, talking about funeral arrangements and trying to convince her to go live with her daughter.

When he stepped into the kitchen and saw Sarah Jane and Chrissy hurriedly finishing up the lunch dishes, he was flabbergasted. Most of Sarah Jane's obligations had ended, and she'd told him at lunch Chrissy had slept through the night.

"Why didn't you do these earlier?" he asked, his eyes narrowed. Now that she had nothing else filling her days, surely she could keep house.

Sarah Jane's eyes met his. "I had just started them when we received a visitor," she began.

"So you spent the day visiting with one of your friends rather than taking care of your duties? As a pastor's wife, it's your job to set an example of cleanliness. When people stop in, they should see an immaculate home. Lunch dishes in the sink at suppertime? I know you baked all morning, and I appreciate that, but did you even clean the bedrooms like you told me you were going to do today?" Micah knew his voice was harsh, but he was frustrated. Why couldn't she do the few simple tasks that all other wives did without complaint?

Sarah Jane closed her eyes for a moment, mentally biting her tongue. She knew keeping her voice calm in the face of his anger was really the only Christian thing she could do. "I didn't have time to get to the bedrooms. I'm sorry. I'll clean them as soon as I finish the supper dishes." She handed the last plate she'd just washed to Chrissy to dry. "Supper's ready."

She put the roast she'd made at Ruby's house on the table along with mashed potatoes, gravy, fresh bread, and green beans. She was thankful Lewis had driven her home. As they prayed, she added her own prayer. *Father, please help me to keep my voice mild. He doesn't know what all I did today, and I don't know what he's done. Please help me not to judge him, and do better to meet his expectations.*

As they ate, Chrissy chattered on and on about some new friends she'd made. Micah finally turned to her. He couldn't let his annoyance with Sarah Jane affect how he treated Chrissy. "What are your friends' names?"

"Jade and Crystal. Crystal's name is almost like mine, isn't it, Daddy? Christmas and Crystal?"

"Yes, almost exactly the same as yours. I like the name Crystal."

"I do too. Do you like my name? I don't know anyone else named

Christmas Carol, but I like having a name no one else has." Chrissy ate quickly, spraying food in her excitement to talk to her father.

"I do like the name Christmas Carol. Where did you meet Crystal and Jade?" Micah asked.

"We met them at Aunt Ruby's house. They're twins, but they don't look exactly alike. I knew twins at the orphanage in Fort Worth who looked just like each other. They were both girls. I didn't like them, though, because they were mean to me."

"I'm sorry about that. Why did you go to Aunt Ruby's house today?"

Sarah Jane sat silently throughout the exchange. She didn't know if she should be ashamed for how little work she'd done or be angry with him for his accusations, so she simply ate her supper, waiting to see how things would play out.

"Well, Dr. Iris came over, and she asked Mama and me to go help Aunt Ruby. She's having a baby, you know!" Chrissy took a sip of her milk, dribbling a bit on her dress.

"I do know that. Why did Aunt Ruby need help, though?"

"She's really sick, and she can't take care of the house or Crystal and Jade. So Dr. Iris asked if Mama and I could do it. I took care of Jade and Crystal while Mama cleaned their whole house."

Micah closed his eyes. That was twice now he'd assumed the worst about his new wife. "How is Ruby?" he asked Sarah Jane, trying his best to convey his apologies with his expression and tone of voice.

"She's not doing well. The doctor is worried she'll deliver early and lose the baby if she doesn't stay in bed, so I said I'd help out."

"As you should have." He took another bite of his potatoes, his eyes meeting hers. "Mr. Johnson died today. I spent the whole day consoling Mrs. Johnson and trying to convince her it's time for her to move in with her daughter. She wants to make a go of ranching on her own."

Sarah Jane shrugged. "She might be able to do it. It would be hard, but she's strong."

"I had a difficult afternoon, and I took it out on you. I'm sorry. It doesn't sound like your day was any easier than mine."

"I don't mind hard work. I'm worried about Ruby and the baby, of course, but cooking and cleaning don't bother me. And I had a wonderful helper who took the twins in hand, caring for them while I did the work. I'm going to spend mornings at Ruby's, and I'll come home to cook and clean in the afternoons. The girls will nap here, so Ruby doesn't have to worry about anything."

"I think that sounds logical. Let me know if there's any way I can help," Micah said. He felt like the worst husband alive, but he was willing to do whatever was necessary to help her.

"No, thank you. You have enough to do." Sarah Jane wasn't about to accept help from him. The more she thought about his assumption and anger, the more upset she got. What had she ever done to make him think she wasn't a hard worker?

Micah frowned, but he knew he'd be able to talk to her later, after Chrissy was in bed. He looked forward to their private time together more and more every day.

After supper, Sarah Jane did the dishes while Chrissy wiped them dry, and then she cleaned Micah's bedroom, mopping the floor and even scrubbing down the walls, while he played with Chrissy.

Once that task was completed, she went to the bedroom she and Chrissy shared and did the same. The bathroom was next. When it was finished, it was time for Chrissy to go to bed. She tucked Chrissy in and laid down beside her as she did every night.

Instead of getting up and going to talk to Micah once Chrissy fell asleep, Sarah Jane fell asleep as well. She didn't mean to, because she had a lot to say to her husband, but she was tired. Taking care of two families was a lot of work, even when she did sleep a full night.

Micah sat in the parlor until past midnight, waiting for Sarah Jane to come out and talk to him. While he waited, he practiced his apology over and over. Finally, at half past twelve, he went to Chrissy's room and carefully opened the door so as not to wake the girl. When he saw his wife asleep, he slowly tiptoed out of the room.

He frowned. Was she so angry with him that she wasn't willing to speak to him? Could he do nothing right in this marriage of his?

* * *

At breakfast the next morning, Micah decided to discuss what was bothering him. Stifling a yawn, he asked, "Why didn't you come talk to me last night? I waited up past midnight."

Sarah Jane felt terrible. "I'm sorry. I was tired, and I fell asleep right after Chrissy did. We'll talk tonight."

Chrissy still hadn't come out of her bedroom, so he pressed a little further. "Are you certain that's all it was?"

"Are you asking if I'm angry with you, Micah? Because if you are, just come right out and ask. There's no reason to beat around the bush."

Micah frowned. "Are you angry with me?"

Sarah Jane shrugged. "A little. But not so much that I wouldn't have come out to talk to you last night. I have things to say, and I'll say them."

Micah nodded, knowing she had every right to express her anger. He had treated her unfairly.

All through the day, Micah thought about ways to apologize to

his bride. He thought about flowers, but they were hard to come by in the winter. There were greenhouses in Austin, but he didn't want to have to drive that far. He didn't have money to buy her jewelry. What could he do to tell her he felt badly for the way he'd jumped to conclusions?

Sarah Jane followed the plan she'd outlined for Micah the previous evening. She spent the morning at Ruby's house, making certain her sister had enough to eat and was comfortable. She cleaned everything quickly. The family had left the dishes for her and Chrissy, but she had no problem with that.

She fixed the noon meal for Ruby, taking it to her room on a small tray. "I'm going to take the girls to my house for the afternoon so they don't make noise and you can nap. You'll be alone for about three hours before the boys are home from school. You need to sleep."

Ruby nodded. "I'm so tired. All I want to do is sleep anyway."

"Do you need me to check on you at all?"

Ruby shook her head. "Tell Lewis to pop his head in at half past one. I'll be fine other than that."

"Okay. I've fed the twins and will put them down for a nap as soon as we get to my house."

Ruby grabbed Sarah Jane's hand. "Thank you for helping me. I never was sure how to feel about you when we were children. You've turned into an amazing woman, always thinking of others first."

Sarah Jane felt a tear pop into her eye. "Thank you for saying that. I know I was more than a little self-righteous."

Ruby grinned. "Maybe a bit."

At home, Sarah Jane set the pot of soup she'd made for lunch on the stove. She'd left a bit for Lewis to eat, but the rest was for her family. She served the thick potato soup she'd made with the bread she'd baked the day before.

Micah walked into the house at lunchtime and took a deep sniff. The breakfast dishes were still in the sink, but he knew better than saying anything about them. She'd been working all morning, and whatever she'd cooked for lunch smelled like it could be served in heaven!

"I have no idea what that is, but I want a whole mountain of it," he told her.

"Just potato soup. Nothing fancy, but it is tasty." Sarah Jane put a large bowl in front of him.

"Thank you. Where's Chrissy?" he asked.

"I fed her with the twins over at Ruby's. I thought it would be easier to feed the little ones at their own home."

"Makes sense to me." He took her hand and said a quick prayer for them. "About last night—I'm sorry. I keep jumping to erroneous

conclusions, and it's not fair to you at all."

"No, it's really not. I'm a hard worker, and I always have been. I don't think it's right that you assume the worst of me so often. If I don't get something done, it's never through lack of effort."

He nodded, his eyes sad. "I know that. I had a hard day yesterday, and I took it out on you. That's no excuse. The truth is, there is no excuse for my behavior, and I'm very sorry."

Sarah Jane nodded. "I forgive you. I'm sorry I fell asleep instead of coming out to talk to you last night. I promise you, it wasn't intentional."

"I realize that now. I was worried that you were angry enough with me for my harsh words that you had decided not to speak to me. I'm glad that's not the case."

"Where do we go from here?" she asked. "I can't live my life the way it needs to be lived and worry my husband is going to constantly assume that I'm not doing something because I'm lazy. I want to be trusted."

He sighed. "I do trust you. I won't make that mistake again." He glanced at the clock on the wall and frowned. "I have an appointment to counsel and pray for a new couple who has moved to Nowhere. They're having some problems. Can we talk about this after Chrissy goes to sleep tonight?"

She nodded. "Of course we can. I intended to do it last night."

He stood, walking around the table to press a kiss to her forehead. "I know. I'm sorry I thought otherwise."

For the rest of the day, Sarah Jane thought about their talk that night while she cleaned and cooked. The girls napped, and Chrissy helped her with the dishes. "Do you enjoy watching the girls?" Sarah Jane asked while they were working side by side.

"Yes, ma'am. They're a lot of work, but I like them."

Sarah Jane smiled. "I'm sure you were a lot of work at that age too."

"Is that why my mama didn't want me anymore?"

"Oh, sweetie. Your mama wanted you or she wouldn't have kept going back to the orphanage to get you. Her circumstances didn't allow her to take care of you, so she put you somewhere you could find a family who would love you. She put you there for your daddy and me."

"Do you think she knew you'd come get me?" Chrissy asked, her voice anxious.

"I don't know. I do know she did the right thing by putting you there. Now we're a family, and we wouldn't be without you."

"Even though you and Daddy are mad at each other?"

Sarah Jane bit her lip, trying to decide how to respond to that.

"We're not really mad at each other. You know how when you move in with a new family, and they expect certain things of you? But you don't know what they are until they tell you?"

"Yes. I got sent back once before they told me what they expected." Chrissy sounded sad.

"Well, that's the place your daddy and I are in. We're trying to learn what the other expects of us, and it's hard work right now, figuring it all out."

Chrissy nodded. "Because you just got married."

"Yes! Because we just got married, and we had a little girl we were getting used to as soon as we married. It's not usually like that."

"But you're not sending me back, because you love me."

"That's right. We're keeping you forever." Sarah Jane was pleased Chrissy remembered they were keeping her. "We're not giving up on each other or on you. We're just learning to deal with each other."

"And we're not going back to the orphanage?" Chrissy asked.

"Not right now. I may work there again in the fall when you've started school, but for now, we're going to stay home. When we're not helping others, of course. You know, one of God's commands is for us to love each other. If we're not doing everything we can when others are sick or hurt, are we really loving?"

Chrissy shook her head. "Is that why we help people?"

"It is. It's because it's the right thing to do. If you knew Jade and Crystal were spending all day by themselves, wouldn't you want to help?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm the same way. I know Ruby needs someone to help her, and we live close by. She's my sister, so I help her."

"You had the same mama?"

Sarah Jane shook her head. "No. I was an orphan like you. Aunt Ruby and I lived in the same orphanage, and eventually, we were both adopted by your grandma."

"I like my grandma. She's nice to me."

"Edna Petunia is nice to everyone. She's a little crazy, but she loves people a lot." *Especially bastard children.*

"I love her too. She lets me help her bake." Chrissy dried the last dish. "When will I get to stay with her like she said I could on my birthday?"

"Well, right now, I want to make sure you quit having your nightmares. You haven't had one for four nights. If you go three more nights without one, then we'll say you can go the following weekend."

"Right now, you need me to help with the girls."

Sarah Jane smiled. "I sure do!" She hugged Chrissy close. "I love you more than I ever thought I could love a little girl. I'm so glad you

came to live with us."

"Me too! Now you and Daddy just need to learn to live together, and everything will be good."

Sarah Jane sighed. She certainly hoped it would be that simple.

* * *

Sarah Jane found Micah in the parlor as soon as Chrissy fell asleep that night. He had his notes spread out around him as usual. He looked up, and a slow grin transformed his face as he held out his hand for her. "I'm glad you joined me."

She sat down beside him, folding her hands properly in her lap unlike she had most nights. Usually, she sat down and curled up against him with her head on his shoulder. Tonight, though, she needed to know where their relationship was going before she wanted to get too close.

"Let's talk," she said softly, her eyes on his.

He turned to her on the sofa, one leg curling up under him. "I'd love to."

"I feel like we're at a strange spot in our relationship. We're married, but we don't live as man and wife. We live more like man and housekeeper. Is that going to continue? Where does our relationship go from here?"

"Not afraid to get right to the point, are you?"

She shook her head. "Why waste time? We both know what we need to talk about."

He sighed. "As far as I'm concerned, I'm ready for a real marriage. Everything I've learned about you has made me fall just a bit more in love with you. I knew I was attracted to you from the first day I saw you in church, but now that I've gotten to know you, I know I've made the right choice. I love you, and want to spend the rest of my life proving that to you."

Sarah Jane stared at him in shock. "If you love me, why did you keep getting so angry with me?"

"Because you weren't telling me everything. If I'd known you weren't able to sleep at night or that you were taking care of Ruby's household as well as ours, I would have been a great deal more lenient. You never really gave me full information, and let me jump to my own conclusions." He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. "I'll do better if you tell me everything."

"And you'll wait to form conclusions until you've asked?"

He grinned. "You've discovered my worst flaw already. I'm impatient and not good at waiting. Now that you know that, won't it be easier?"

She laughed, shaking her head. "Since I love you despite your big

flaw, I think we'll do fine. Just please try to give me a chance before you accuse me of the worst."

He pulled her toward him, kissing her lips. "I will try my very best. Will you try to tell me when you agree to do much more than you should for others?"

She nodded, resting her head against his shoulder. "Maybe we should ask Edna to have her special weekend with Chrissy, and we can spend a couple of days really getting to know each other."

"I'd like that a lot. The funeral is Friday, so the only thing I really need to do Saturday is work on my sermon."

She smiled, kissing his chin. "Then let's take Chrissy to Edna Petunia on Friday night, and the two of us can have the weekend. Katie will help Ruby on Saturday."

He smiled. "It's a few weeks late, but that sounds exactly like a honeymoon to me."

She laughed. "What more could we ask for? Two child-free nights will feel like heaven right about now."

He stroked her cheek. "I promise you. They will be."

Epilogue

Micah was in a good mood as he walked into the house. He had spent the entire day driving around the area, visiting the sick and elderly. More than anything, he'd enjoyed the environment. The bluebonnets were in bloom, and the whole area looked as if God had painted it just for his enjoyment.

As he stepped inside, he frowned. The house was a disaster once again, and his wife and daughter were nowhere to be found.

He searched the house and found Chrissy in her room. She came out with her finger over her lips. "Shh. Mama's sleeping."

Micah frowned. "Sleeping?" Sarah Jane wasn't given to napping, especially when she hadn't finished her chores for the day. He knew Chrissy hadn't kept her up all night because Chrissy slept alone now, and she hadn't come into their room during the night. "I'll go talk to her."

Chrissy frowned. "But she's tired."

"I love that you protect your mama, but you don't have to protect her from me. I love her too."

Chrissy shrugged, going back into her room.

Micah opened the door to their bedroom quietly, going in to sit on the side of the bed where Sarah Jane was curled up on her side, sound asleep. "Sarah Jane? Are you all right?"

Sarah Jane sat up and immediately lay back down. "I'm sorry! I slept longer than I meant to."

"Did you help someone today? Are you sick?"

"I didn't help anyone, and I'm not exactly sick." She frowned. "Oh, this wasn't how I meant to tell you!"

"Tell me what? What's going on here, Sarah Jane?" He'd learned his lesson about jumping to conclusions, and he was sure there was a reason she was sleeping the day away instead of working. He just didn't understand what that reason was yet.

Sarah Jane took his hand and pressed it to her belly. "We're expecting. A baby of our own."

Micah's eyes grew wide. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "I saw Dr. Iris early this afternoon, and she confirmed it."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm just really tired and queasy. When I came in here, I promised myself I'd shut my eyes for only a minute. That was right after lunch. I haven't even fixed supper." She closed her eyes. "I'm sorry!"

"Don't be sorry. Are you able to cook? Should I make something?"

Sarah Jane eyed him skeptically. "What do you know how to cook?"

"Pancakes. I'll make some if you want." Micah was willing to do anything for her. She was carrying his child, after all.

"That's all right. Pancakes don't sound like the healthiest meal I could eat. I'll fix something." She took a deep breath and rolled to a sitting position. "The queasiness seems to be over."

"You're sure?"

"I'm fine. I can handle supper." She smiled. "I can't wait to hold him!"

"Him? Are you that sure it's a boy?" Micah teased.

"I honestly don't care if we get a boy or a girl. A healthy child who will always be loved will suit me just fine. Maybe he can share a birthday with our daughter. I'm due on the twenty-third of December."

Micah laughed. "Well, our little Christmas Carol wouldn't mind sharing her birthday. She thinks it's the best day in the world already."

"I do too. Because it's the day she came into this world." Sarah Jane's eyes met his. "I'm so glad you're in my life."

He pulled her to him, kissing her softly. "So am I. Life would never be complete without you and Chrissy."

If you enjoyed this Christmas romance, be sure to look for the others in the Countdown to Christmas series. Find them [HERE](#)

Author Bio



USA Today bestselling author Kirsten Osbourne knows how to write romance. Each book is an experience that transplants the reader, indulging them in decadence, intense emotion, and sweeping love.

Hailing from the state of Wisconsin, she has lived in Texas for over thirty years as a mother, writer, and wife. Married to the love of her life for more than fifteen years, she knows that true love exists, and shares that vision with the world.

She writes contemporary and historical romance as well, and also ventures into the realm of paranormal romance. She invites you to join her in her world of fantasy, love, and make believe, no matter the location, where there is always a happily ever after at the end. You can learn more about her at <http://www.kirstenandmorganna.com>.

Table of Contents

Sarah Jane

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

she would be a good wife for him. Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Epilogue

Author Bio